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ALL STAR ISSUE

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy AND Science Fiction

JULY 40¢

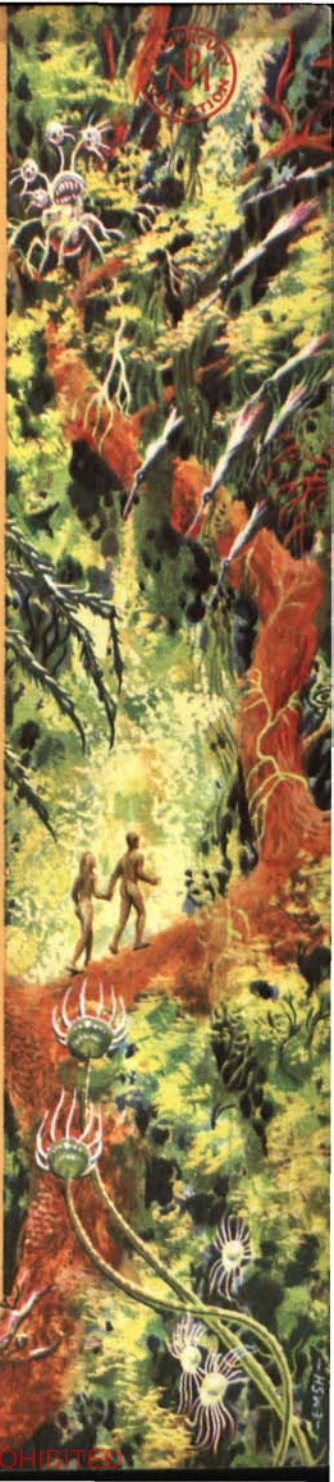
Undergrowth
BRIAN W. ALDISS

Something Strange
KINGSLEY AMIS

Night Piece
POUL ANDERSON

Recipe for a Planet
ISAAC ASIMOV

Closing Time
KRIS NEVILLE



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Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Kingsley Amis came on the literary scene as an Angry Young Man, with that comic delight, LUCKY JIM. *Last year's examination of science fiction,* NEW MAPS OF HELL, *on the other hand, was far less angry than the reception it received in many science fiction circles, and Mr. Amis' newest novel,* TAKE A GIRL LIKE YOU, *while treating of a depressing human landscape, was rather more earnest than choleric. As for the present tale—concerning four people isolated in a motionless steel sphere hanging in a remote region of space—well, we leave it to you to determine Mr. Amis' emotions.*

SOMETHING STRANGE

by Kingsley Amis

SOMETHING STRANGE HAPpened every day. It might happen during the morning, while the two men were taking their readings and observations and the two women busy with the domestic routine: the big faces had come during the morning. Or, as with the little faces and the coloured fires, the strange thing would happen in the afternoon, in the middle of Bruno's maintenance programme and Clovis's transmission to Base, Lia's rounds of the garden and Myri's work on her story. The evening was often undisturbed, the night less often.

They all understood that ordinary temporal expressions had no meaning for people confined indefinitely, as they were, to a motionless steel sphere hanging in a region of space so empty that the light of the nearest star took some hundreds of years to reach them. The Standing Orders devised by Base, however, recommended that they adopt a twenty-four-hour unit of time, as was the rule on the Earth they had not seen for many months. The arrangement suited them well: their work, recreation and rest seemed to fall naturally into the periods provided. It was only the prospect of year after year of the same routine, stretching further into the future than they could see, that was a source of strain.

Bruno commented on this to

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Clovis after a morning spent repairing a fault in the spectrum analyser they used for investigating and classifying the nearer stars. They were sitting at the main observation port in the lounge, drinking the midday cocktail and waiting for the women to join them.

'I'd say we stood up to it extremely well,' Clovis said in answer to Bruno. 'Perhaps too well.'

Bruno hunched his fat figure upright. 'How do you mean?'

'We may be hindering our chances of being relieved.'

'Base has never said a word about our relief.'

'Exactly. With half a million stations to staff, it'll be a long time before they get round to one like this, where everything runs smoothly. You and I are a perfect team, and you have Lia and I have Myri, and they're all right together—no real conflict at all. Hence no reason for a relief.'

Myri had heard all this as she laid the table in the alcove. She wondered how Clovis could not know that Bruno wanted to have her instead of Lia, or perhaps as well as Lia. If Clovis did know, and was teasing Bruno, then that would be a silly thing to do, because Bruno was not a pleasant man. With his thick neck and pale fat face he would not be pleasant to be had by, either, quite unlike Clovis, who was no taller but whose straight, hard body and soft skin were always pleasant. He could not think as well as Bruno, but on the other hand many of the things Bruno thought were not pleasant. She poured herself a drink and went over to them.

Bruno had said something about its being a pity they could not fake their personnel report by inventing a few quarrels, and Clovis had immediately agreed that that was impossible. She kissed him and sat down at his side. 'What do you think about the idea of being relieved?' he asked her.

'I never think about it.'

'Quite right,' Bruno said, grinning. 'You're doing very nicely here. Fairly nicely, anyway.'

'What are you getting at?' Clovis asked him with a different kind of grin.

'It's not a very complete life, is it? For any of us. I could do with a change, anyway. A different kind of job, something that isn't testing and using and repairing apparatus. We do seem to have a lot of repairing to do, don't we? That analyser breaks down almost every day. And yet . . .'

His voice tailed off and he looked out of the port, as if to assure himself that all that lay beyond it was the familiar starscape of points and smudges of light.

'And yet what?' Clovis asked, irritably this time.

'I was just thinking that we really ought to be thankful for having plenty to do. There's the

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routine, and the fruits and vegetables to look after, and Myri's story. . . . How's that going, by the way? Won't you read us some of it? This evening, perhaps?'

'Not until it's finished, if you don't mind.'

'Oh, but I do mind. It's part of our duty to entertain one another. And I'm very interested in it personally.'

'Why?'

'Because you're an interesting girl. Bright brown eyes and a healthy, glowing skin—how do you manage it after all this time in space? And you've more energy than any of us.'

Myri said nothing. Bruno was good at making remarks there was nothing to say to.

'What's it about, this story of yours?' he pursued. 'At least you can tell us that.'

'I have told you. It's about normal life. Life on Earth before there were any space stations, lots of different people doing different things, not this——'

'That's normal life, is it, different people doing different things? I can't wait to hear what the things are. Who's the hero, Myri? Our dear Clovis?'

Myri put her hand on Clovis's shoulder. 'No more, please, Bruno. Let's go back to your point about the routine. I couldn't understand why you left out the most important part, the part that keeps us busiest of all.'

'Ah, the strange happenings.' Bruno dipped his head in a characteristic gesture, half laugh, half nervous tremor. 'And the hours we spend discussing them. Oh yes. How could I have failed to mention all that?'

'If you've got any sense you'll go on not mentioning it,' Clovis snapped. 'We're all fed up with the whole business.'

'You may be, but I'm not. I want to discuss it. So does Myri, don't you, Myri?'

'I do think perhaps it's time we made another attempt to find a pattern,' Myri said. This was a case of Bruno not being pleasant but being right.

'Oh, not again.' Clovis bounded up and went over to the drinks table. 'Ah, hallo, Lia,' he said to the tall, thin blonde woman who had just entered with a tray of cold dishes. 'Let me get you a drink. Bruno and Myri are getting philosophical—looking for patterns. What do you think? I'll tell you what I think. I think we're doing enough already. I think patterns are Base's job.'

'We can make it ours too,' Bruno said. 'You agree, Lia?'

'Of course,' Lia said in the deep voice that seemed to Myri to carry so much more firmness and individuality in its tone than any of its owner's words or actions.

'Very well. You can stay out of this if you like, Clovis. We start from the fact that what we see and

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hear need not be illusions, although they may be.'

'At least that they're illusions that any human being might have, they're not special to us, as we know from Base's reports of what happens to other stations.'

'Correct, Myri. In any event, illusions or not, they are being directed at us by an intelligence and for a purpose.'

'We don't know that,' Myri objected. 'They may be natural phenomena, or the by-product of some intelligent activity not directed at us.'

'Correct again, but let us reserve these less probable possibilities until later. Now, as a sample, consider the last week's strange happenings. I'll fetch the log so that there can be no dispute.'

'I wish you'd stop it,' Clovis said when Bruno had gone out to the apparatus room. 'It's a waste of time.'

'Time's the only thing we're not short of.'

'I'm not short of anything,' he said, touching her thigh. 'Come with me for a little while.'

'Later.'

'Lia always goes with Bruno when he asks her.'

'Oh yes, but that's my choice,' Lia said. 'She doesn't want to now. Wait until she wants to.'

'I don't like waiting.'

'Waiting can make it better.'

'Here we are,' Bruno said briskly, returning. 'Right. . . . Monday. *Within a few seconds the sphere became encased in a thick brownish damp substance that tests revealed to be both impermeable and infinitely thick. No action by the staff suggested itself. After three hours and eleven minutes the substance disappeared.* It's the *infinitely thick* thing that's interesting. That must have been an illusion, or something would have happened to all the other stations at the same time, not to speak of the stars and planets. A total or partial illusion, then. Agreed?'

'Go on.'

'Tuesday. *Metallic object of size comparable to that of the sphere approaching on collision course at 500 kilometres per second. No countermeasures available. Object appeared instantaneously at 35 million kilometres' distance and disappeared instantaneously at 1500 kilometres.* What about that?'

'We've had ones like that before,' Lia put in. 'Only this was the longest time it's taken to approach and the nearest it's come before disappearing.'

'Incomprehensible or illusion,' Myri suggested.

'Yes, I think that's the best we can do at the moment. Wednesday: a very trivial one, not worth discussing. *A being apparently constructed entirely of bone approached the main port and made beckoning motions.* Who-

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ever's doing this must be running out of ideas. Thursday. *All bodies external to the sphere vanished to all instruments simultaneously, reappearing to all instruments simultaneously two hours later.* That's not a new one either, I seem to remember. Illusion? Good. Friday. *Beings resembling terrestrial reptiles covered the sphere, fighting ceaselessly and eating portions of one another. Loud rustling and slithering sounds.* The sounds at least must have been an illusion, with no air out there, and I never heard of a reptile that didn't breathe. The same sort of thing applies to yesterday's performance. *Human screams of pain and extreme astonishment approaching and receding. No visual or other accompaniment.*' He paused and looked round at them. 'Well? Any uniformities suggest themselves?'

'No,' Clovis said, helping himself to salad, for they sat now at the lunch table. 'And I defy any human brain to devise any. The whole thing's arbitrary.'

'On the contrary, the very next happening—today's when it comes—might reveal an unmistakable pattern.'

'The one to concentrate on,' Myri said, 'is the approaching object. Why did it vanish before striking the sphere?'

Bruno stared at her. 'It had to, if it was an illusion.'

'Not at all. Why couldn't we have had an illusion of the sphere being struck? And supposing it wasn't an illusion?'

'Next time there's an object, perhaps it will strike,' Lia said.

Clovis laughed. 'That's a good one. What would happen if it did, I wonder? And it wasn't an illusion?'

They all looked at Bruno for an answer. After a moment or two, he said: 'I presume the sphere would shatter and we'd all be thrown into space. I simply can't imagine what that would be like. We should be . . . Never to see one another again, or anybody or anything else, to be nothing more than a senseless lump floating in space for ever. The chances of—'

'It would be worth something to be rid of your conversation,' Clovis said, amiable again now that Bruno was discomfited. 'Let's be practical for a change. How long will it take you to run off your analyses this afternoon? There's a lot of stuff to go out to Base and I shan't be able to give you a hand.'

'An hour, perhaps, after I've run the final tests.'

'Why run tests at all? She was lined up perfectly when we finished this morning.'

'Fortunately.'

'Fortunately indeed. One more variable and we might have found it impossible.'

'Yes,' Bruno said abstractedly.

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Then he got to his feet so abruptly that the other three started. 'But we didn't, did we? There wasn't one more variable, was there? It didn't quite happen, you see, the thing we couldn't handle.'

Nobody spoke.

'Excuse me, I must be by myself.'

'If Bruno keeps this up,' Clovis said to the two women, 'Base will send us a relief sooner than we think.'

Myri tried to drive the thought of Bruno's strange behaviour out of her head when, half an hour later, she sat down to work on her story. The expression on his face as he left the table had been one she could not name. Excitement? Dislike? Surprise? That was the nearest—a kind of persistent surprise. Well, he was certain, being Bruno, to set about explaining it at dinner. She wished he were more pleasant, because he did think well.

Finally expelling the image of Bruno's face, she began rereading the page of manuscript she had been working on when the screams had interrupted her the previous afternoon. It was part of a difficult scene, one in which a woman met by chance a man who had been having her ten years earlier, with the complication that she was at the time in the company of the man who was currently having her. The scene was an eating alcove in a large city.

'Go away,' Volsci said, 'Or I'll hit you.'

Norbu smiled in a not-pleasant way. 'What good would that do? Irmy likes me better than she likes you. You are more pleasant, no doubt, but she likes me better. She remembers me having her ten years ago more clearly than she remembers you having her last night. I am good at thinking, which is better than any amount of being pleasant.'

'She's having her meal with me,' Volsci said, pointing to the cold food and drinks in front of them. 'Aren't you, Irmy?'

'Yes, Irmy,' Norbu said. 'You must choose. If you can't let both of us have you, you must say which of us you like better.'

Irmy looked from one man to the other. There was so much difference between them that she could hardly begin to choose: the one more pleasant, the other better at thinking, the one slim, the other plump. She decided being pleasant was better. It was more important and more significant—better in every way that made a real difference. She said: 'I'll have Volsci.'

Norbu looked surprised and sorry. 'I think you're wrong.'

'You might as well go now,' Volsci said. 'Ila will be waiting.'

'Yes,' Norbu said. He looked extremely sorry now.

Irmy felt quite sorry too. 'Goodbye, Norbu,' she said.

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Myri smiled to herself. It was good, even better than she had remembered—there was no point in being modest inside one's own mind. She must be a real writer in spite of Bruno's scoffing, or how could she have invented these characters, who were so utterly unlike anybody she knew, and then put them into a situation that was so completely outside her experience? The only thing she was not sure about was whether she might not have overplayed the part about feeling or dwelt on it at too great length. Perhaps *extremely sorry* was a little heavy; she replaced it by *sorrier than before.* Excellent: now there was just the right touch of restraint in the middle of all the feeling. She decided she could finish off the scene in a few lines.

'Probably see you at some cocktail hour,' Volsci said, she wrote, then looked up with a frown as the buzzer sounded at her door. She crossed her tiny wedged-shaped room—its rear wall was part of the outer wall of the sphere, but it had no port—threw the lock and found Bruno on the threshold. He was breathing fast, as if he had been hurrying or lifting a heavy weight, and she saw with distaste that there were drops of sweat on his thick skin. He pushed past her and sat down on her bed, his mouth open.

'What is it?' she asked, displeased. The afternoon was a private time unless some other arrangement were made at lunch.

'I don't know what it is. I think I must be ill.'

'Ill? But you can't be. Only people on Earth get ill. Nobody on a station is ever ill: Base told us that. Illness is caused by—'

'I don't think I believe some of the things that Base says.'

'But who can we believe if we don't believe Base?'

Bruno evidently did not hear her question. He said: 'I had to come to you—Lia's no good for this. Please let me stay with you, I've got so much to say.'

'It's no use, Bruno. Clovis is the one who has me. I thought you understood that I didn't—'

'That's not what I mean,' he said impatiently. 'Where I need you is in thinking. Though that's connected with the other, the having. I don't expect you to see that. I've only just begun to see it myself.'

Myri could make nothing of this last part. 'Thinking? Thinking about what?'

He bit his lip and shut his eyes for a moment. 'Listen to this,' he said. 'It was the analyser that set my mind going. Almost every other day it breaks down. And the computer, the counters, the repellers, the scanners and the rest of them—they're always breaking down too, and so are their power supplies. But not the purifier or the fluid-reconstitutor or the fruit and vegetable growers or the heat-

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ers or the main power source. Why not?'

'Well, they're less complicated. How can a fruit grower go wrong? A chemical tank and a water tank is all there is to it. You ask Lia about that.'

'All right. Try answering this, then. The strange happenings. If they're illusions, why are they always outside the sphere? Why are there never any inside?'

'Perhaps there are,' Myri said.

'Don't. I don't want that. I shouldn't like that. I want everything in here to be real. Are you real? I must believe you are.'

'Of course I'm real.' She was now thoroughly puzzled.

'And it makes a difference, doesn't it? It's very important that you and everything else should be real, everything in the sphere. But tell me: whatever's arranging these happenings must be pretty powerful if it can fool our instruments and our senses so completely and consistently, and yet it can't do anything—anything we recognise as strange, that is—inside this puny little steel skin. Why not?'

'Presumably it has its limitations. We should be pleased.'

'Yes. All right, next point. You remember the time I tried to sit up in the lounge after midnight and stay awake?'

'That was silly. Nobody can stay awake after midnight. Standing Orders were quite clear on that point.'

'Yes, they were, weren't they?' Bruno seemed to be trying to grin. 'Do you remember my telling you how I couldn't account for being in my own bed as usual when the music woke us—you remember the big music? And—this is what I'm really after—do you remember how we all agreed at breakfast that life in space must have conditioned us in such a way that falling asleep at a fixed time had become an automatic mechanism? You remember that?"

'Naturally I do.'

'Right. Two questions, then. Does that strike you as a likely explanation? That sort of complete self-conditioning in all four of us after . . . just a number of months?'

'Not when you put it like that.'

'But we all agreed on it, didn't we? Without hesitation.'

Myri, leaning against a side wall, fidgeted. He was being not pleasant in a new way, one that made her want to stop him talking even while he was thinking at his best. 'What's your other question, Bruno?' Her voice sounded unusual to her.

'Ah, you're feeling it too, are you?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'I think you will in a minute. Try my other question. The night of the music was a long time ago, soon after we arrived here, but you remember it clearly. So do I. And yet when I try to remember what

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I was doing only a couple of months earlier, on Earth, finishing up my life there, getting ready for this, it's just a vague blur. Nothing stands out.'

'It's all so remote.'

'Maybe. But I remember the trip clearly enough, don't you?'

Myri caught her breath. I feel surprised, she told herself. Or something like that. I feel the way Bruno looked when he left the lunch table. She said nothing.

'You're feeling it now all right, aren't you?' He was watching her closely with his narrow eyes. 'Let me try to describe it. A surprise that goes on and on. Puzzlement. Symptoms of physical exertion or strain. And above all a . . . a sort of discomfort, only in the mind. Like having a sharp object pressed against a tender part of your body, except that this is in your mind.'

'What are you talking about?'

'A difficulty of vocabulary.'

The loudspeaker above the door clicked on and Clovis's voice said: 'Attention. Strange happening. Assemble in the lounge at once. Strange happening.'

Myri and Bruno stopped staring at each other and hurried out along the narrow corridor. Clovis and Lia were already in the lounge, looking out of the port.

Apparently only a few feet beyond the steelhard glass, and illuminated from some invisible source, were two floating figures. The detail was excellent, and the four inside the sphere could distinguish without difficulty every fold in the naked skin of the two caricatures of humanity presented, it seemed, for their thorough inspection, a presumption given added weight by the slow rotation of the pair that enabled their every portion to be scrutinised. Except for a scrubby growth at the base of the skull, they were hairless. The limbs were foreshortened, lacking the normal narrowing at the joints, and the bellies protuberant. One had male characteristics, the other female, yet in neither case were these complete. From each open, wet, quivering toothless mouth there came a loud, clearly audible yelling, higher in pitch than any those in the sphere could have produced, and of an unfamiliar emotional range.

'Well, I wonder how long this will last,' Clovis said.

'Is it worth trying the repellers on them?' Lia asked. 'What does the radar say? Does it see them?'

'I'll go and have a look.'

Bruno turned his back on the port. 'I don't like them.'

'Why not?' Myri saw he was sweating again.

'They remind me of something.'

'What?'

'I'm trying to think.'

But although Bruno went on trying to think for the rest of that day, with such obvious seriousness that even Clovis did his best

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to help with suggestions, he was no nearer a solution when they parted, as was their habit, at five minutes to midnight. And when, several times in the next couple of days, Myri mentioned the afternoon of the caricatures to him, he showed little interest.

'Bruno, you are extraordinary,' she said one evening. 'What happened to those odd feelings of yours you were so eager to describe to me just before Clovis called us into the lounge?'

He shrugged his narrow shoulders in the almost girlish way he had. 'Oh, I don't know what could have got into me,' he said. 'I expect I was just angry with that confounded analyser and the way it kept breaking down. It's been much better recently.'

'And all that thinking you used to do.'

'That was a complete waste of time.'

'Surely not.'

'Yes, I agree with Clovis, let Base do all the thinking.'

Myri was disappointed. To hear Bruno resigning the task of thought seemed like the end of something. This feeling was powerfully underlined for her when, a little later, the announcement came over the loudspeaker in the lounge. Without any preamble at all, other than the usual click on, a strange voice said: 'Your attention, please. This is Base calling over your intercom.'

They all looked up in great surprise, especially Clovis, who said quickly to Bruno: 'Is that possible?'

'Oh yes, they've been experimenting,' Bruno replied as quickly.

'It is perhaps ironical,' the voice went on, 'that the first transmission we have been able to make to you by the present means is also the last you will receive by any. For some time the maintenance of space stations has been uneconomic, and the decision has just been taken to discontinue them altogether. You will therefore make no further reports of any kind, or rather you may of course continue to do so on the understanding that nobody will be listening. In many cases it has fortunately been found possible to arrange for the collection of station staffs and their return to Earth; in others, those involving a journey to the remoter parts of the galaxy, a prohibitive expenditure of time and effort would be entailed. I am sorry to have to tell you that your own station is one of these. Accordingly, you will never be relieved. All of us here are confident that you will respond to this new situation with dignity and resource.

'Before we sever communication for the last time, I have one more point to make. It involves a revelation which may prove so unwelcome that only with the greatest reluctance can I bring myself to utter it. My colleagues, how-

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ever, insisted that those in your predicament deserve, in your own interests, to hear the whole truth about it. I must tell you, then, that contrary to your earlier information we have had no reports from any other station whose content resembles in the slightest degree your accounts of the strange happenings you claim to have witnessed. The deception was considered necessary so that your morale might be maintained, but the time for deceptions is over. You are unique, and in the variety of mankind that is no small distinction. Be proud of it. Goodbye for ever.'

They sat without speaking until five minutes to midnight. Try as she would, Myri found it impossible to conceive their future, and the next morning she had no more success. That was as long as any of them had leisure to come to terms with their permanent isolation, for by midday a quite new phase of strange happenings had begun. Myri and Lia were preparing lunch in the kitchen when Myri, opening the cupboard where the dishes were kept, was confronted by a flattish, reddish creature with many legs and a pair of unequally-sized pincers. She gave a gasp, almost a shriek, of astonishment.

"What is it?' Lia said, hurrying over, and then in a high voice: 'Is it alive?'

'It's moving. Call the men.'

Until the others came, Myri simply stared. She found her lower lip shaking in a curious way. *Inside* now, she kept thinking. Not just outside. *Inside.*

'Let's have a look,' Clovis said. 'I see. Pass me a knife or something.' He rapped at the creature, making a dry, bony sound. 'Well, it works for tactile and aural as well as visual, anyway. A thorough illusion. If it is one.'

'It must be,' Bruno said. 'Don't you recognise it?'

'There is something familiar about it. I suppose.'

'You suppose? You mean you don't know a crab when you see one?'

'Oh, of course,' Clovis looked slightly sheepish. 'I remember now. A terrestrial animal, isn't it? Lives in the water. And so it must be an illusion. Crabs don't cross space as far as I know, and even if they could they'd have a tough time carving their way through the skin of the sphere.'

His sensible manner and tone helped Myri to get over her astonishment, and it was she who suggested that the crab be disposed of down the waste chute. At lunch she said: 'It was a remarkably specific illusion, don't you think? I wonder how it was projected.'

'No point in wondering about that,' Bruno told her. 'How can we ever know?' And what use would the knowledge be to us if we did know?'

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'Knowing the truth has its own value.'

'I don't understand you.'

Lia came in with the coffee just then. 'The crab's back,' she said. 'Or there's another one there, I can't tell.'

More crabs, or simulacra thereof, appeared at intervals for the rest of the day, eleven of them in all. It seemed, as Clovis put it, that the illusion-producing technique had its limitations, inasmuch as none of them saw a crab actually materialise: the new arrival would be 'discovered' under a bed or behind a bank of apparatus. On the other hand, the depth of illusion produced was very great, as they all agreed when Myri, putting the eighth crab down the chute, was nipped in the finger, suffered pain and exuded a few drops of blood.

'Another new departure,' Clovis said. 'An illusory physical process brought about on the actual person of one of us. They're improving.'

Next morning there were the insects. The main apparatus room was found to be infested with what, again on Bruno's prompting, they recognised as cockroaches. By lunch-time there were moths and flying beetles in all the main rooms, and a number of large flies became noticeable towards the evening. The whole of their attention became concentrated upon avoiding these creatures as far as possible. The day passed without Clovis asking Myri to go with him. This had never happened before.

The following afternoon a fresh problem was raised by Lia's announcement that the garden now contained no fruits or vegetables—none, at any rate, that were accessible to her senses. In this the other three concurred. Clovis put the feelings of all of them into words when he said: 'If this is an illusion, it's as efficient as the reality, because fruits and vegetables you can never find are the same as no fruits and vegetables.'

The evening meal used up all the food they had. Soon after two o'clock in the morning Myri was aroused by Clovis's voice saying over the loudspeaker: 'Attention, everyone. Strange happening. Assemble in the lounge immediately.

She was still on her way when she became aware of a new quality in the background of silence she had grown used to. It was a deeper silence, as if some sound at the very threshold of audibility had ceased. There were unfamiliar vibrations underfoot.

Clovis was standing by the port, gazing through it with interest. 'Look at this, Myri,' he said.

At a distance impossible to gauge, an oblong of light had become visible, a degree or so in breadth and perhaps two and a half times as high. The light was of comparable quality to that illuminating the inside of the sphere. Now and then it flickered.

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'What is it?' Myri asked.

'I don't know, it's only just appeared.' The floor beneath them shuddered violently. 'That was what woke me, one of those tremors. Ah, here you are, Bruno. What do you make of it?'

Bruno's large eyes widened further, but he said nothing. A moment later Lia arrived and joined the silent group by the port. Another vibration shook the sphere. Some vessel in the kitchen fell to the floor and smashed. Then Myri said: 'I can see what looks like a flight of steps leading down from the lower edge of the light. Three or four of them, perhaps more.'

She had barely finished speaking when a shadow appeared before them, cast by the rectangle of light on to a surface none of them could identify. The shadow seemed to them of a stupefying vastness, but it was beyond question that of a man. A moment later the man came into view, outlined by the light, and descended the steps. Another moment or two and he was evidently a few feet from the port, looking in at them, their own lights bright on the upper half of him. He was a well-built man wearing a grey uniform jacket and a metal helmet. An object recognisable as a gun of some sort was slung over his shoulder. While he watched them, two other figures, similarly accoutred, came down the steps and joined him. There was a brief interval, then he moved out of view to their right, doing so with the demeanour of one walking on a level surface.

None of the four inside spoke or moved, not even at the sound of heavy bolts being drawn in the section of outer wall directly in front of them, not even when that entire section swung away from them like a door opening outwards and the three men stepped through into the sphere. Two of them had unslung the guns from their shoulders.

Myri remembered an occasion, weeks ago, when she had risen from a stooping position in the kitchen and struck her head violently on the bottom edge of a cupboard door Lia had happened to leave open. The feeling Myri now experienced was similar, except that she had no particular physical sensations. Another memory, a much fainter one, passed across the far background of her mind: somebody had once tried to explain to her the likeness between a certain mental state and the bodily sensation of discomfort, and she had not understood. The memory faded sharply.

The man they had first seen said: 'All roll up your sleeves.'

Clovis looked at him with less curiosity than he had been showing when Myri first joined him at the port, a few minutes earlier. 'You're an illusion,' he said.

'No I'm not. Roll up your sleeves, all of you.'

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He watched them closely while they obeyed, becoming impatient at the slowness with which they moved. The other man whose gun was unslung, a younger man, said: 'Don't be hard on them, Allen. We've no idea what they've been through.'

'I'm not taking any chances,' Allen said. 'Not after that crowd in the trees. Now this is for your own good,' he went on, addressing the four. 'Keep quite still. All right, Douglas.'

The third man came forward, holding what Myri knew to be a hypodermic syringe. He took her firmly by her bare arm and gave her an injection. At once her feelings altered, in the sense that, although there was still discomfort in her mind, neither this nor anything else seemed to matter.

After a time she heard the young man say: 'You can roll your sleeves down now. You can be quite sure that nothing bad will happen to you.'

'Come with us,' Allen said.

Myri and the others followed the three men out of the sphere, across a gritty floor that might have been concrete and up the steps, a distance of perhaps thirty feet. They entered a corridor with artificial lighting and then a room into which the sun was streaming. There were twenty or thirty people in the room, some of them wearing the grey uniform. Now and then the walls shook as the sphere had done, but to the accompaniment of distant explosions. A faint shouting could also be heard from time to time.

Allen's voice said loudly: 'Let's try and get a bit of order going. Douglas, they'll be wanting you to deal with the people in the tank. They've been conditioned to believe they're congenitally aquatic, so you'd better give them a shot that'll knock them out straight away. Holmes is draining the tank now. Off you go. Now you, James, you watch this lot while I find out some more about them. I wish those psycho chaps would turn up —we're just working in the dark.' His voice moved further away. 'Sergeant—get these five out of here.'

'Where to, sir?'

'I don't mind where—just out of here. And watch them.'

'They've all been given shots, sir.'

'I know, but look at them, they're not human any more. And it's no use talking to them, they've been deprived of language. That's how they got the way they are. Now get them out right away.'

Myri looked slowly at the young man who stood near them: James. 'Where are we?' she asked.

James hesitated. 'I was ordered to tell you nothing,' he said. 'You're supposed to wait for the psychological team to get to you and treat you.'

'Please.'

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'All right. This much can't hurt you, I suppose. You four and a number of other groups have been the subject of various experiments. This building is part of Special Welfare Research Station No. 4. Or rather it was. The government that set it up no longer exists. It has been removed by the revolutionary army of which I'm a member. We had to shoot our way in here and there's fighting still going on.'

'Then we weren't in space at all.'

'No.'

'Why did they make us believe we were?'

'We don't know yet.'

'And how did they do it?'

'Some new form of deep-level hypnosis, it seems, probably renewed at regular intervals. Plus various apparatus for producing illusions. We're still working on that. Now, I think that's enough questions for the moment. The best thing you can do is sit down.'

'Thank you. What's hypnosis?'

'Oh, of course they'd have removed knowledge of that. It'll all be explained to you later.'

'James, come and have a look at this, will you?' Allen's voice called. 'I can't make much of it.'

Myri followed James a little way. Among the clamour of voices, some speaking languages unfamiliar to her, others speaking none, she heard James ask: 'Is this the right file? Fear Elimination?'

'Must be,' Allen answered. 'Here's the last full entry. *Removal of Bruno V and substitution of Bruno VI accomplished, together with memory-adjustment of other three subjects. Memo to Preparation Centre: avoid repetition of Bruno V personality-type with strong curiosity-drives.* Started catching on to the set-up, eh? Wonder what they did with him.'

'There's that psycho hospital across the way they're still investigating; perhaps he's in there.'

'With Brunos I to IV, no doubt. Never mind that for the moment. Now. *Procedures: penultimate phase. Removal of all ultimate confidence: severance of communication, total denial of prospective change, inculcation of "uniqueness" syndrome, environment shown to be violable, unknowable crisis in prospect (food deprivation).* I can understand that last bit. They don't look starved, though.'

'Perhaps they've only just started them on it.'

'We'll get them fed in a minute. Well, all this still beats me, James. *Reactions. Little change. Responses poor. Accelerating impoverishment of emotional life and its vocabulary: compare portion of novel written by Myri VII with contributions of predecessors. Prognosis: further affective deterioration: catatonic apathy: failure of experiment.* That's a comfort, anyway. But what has all

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this got to do with fear elimination?'

They stopped talking suddenly and Myri followed the direction of their gaze. A door had been opened and the man called Douglas was supervising the entry of a number of others, each supporting or carrying a human form wrapped in a blanket.

'This must be the lot from the tank,' Allen or James said.

Myri watched while those in the blankets were made as comfortable as possible on benches or on the floor. One of them, however, remained totally wrapped in his blanket and was being paid no attention.

'He's had it, has he?'

'Shock, I'm afraid.' Douglas's voice was unsteady. 'There was nothing we could do. Perhaps we shouldn't have . . .'

Myri stooped and turned back the edge of the blanket. What she saw was much stranger than anything she had experienced in the sphere. 'What's the matter with him?' she asked James.

'Matter with him? You can die of shock, you know.'

'I can do what?'

Myri, staring at James, was aware that his face had become distorted by a mixture of expressions. One of them was understanding: all the others were painful to look at. They were renderings of what she herself was feeling. Her vision darkened and she ran from the room, back the way they had come, down the steps, across the floor, back into the sphere.

James was unfamiliar with the arrangement of the rooms there and did not reach her until she had picked up the manuscript of the novel, hugged it to her chest with crossed arms and fallen on to her bed, her knees drawn up as far as they would go, her head lowered as it had been before her birth, an event of which she knew nothing.

She was still in the same position when, days later, somebody sat heavily down beside her. 'Myri. You must know who this is. Open your eyes, Myri. Come out of there.'

After he had said this, in the same gentle voice, some hundreds of times, she did open her eyes a little. She was in a long, high room, and near her was a fat man with a pale skin. He reminded her of something to do with space and thinking. She screwed her eyes shut.

'Myri. I know you remember me. Open your eyes again.'

She kept them shut while he went on talking.

'Open your eyes. Straighten your body.'

She did not move.

'Straighten your body, Myri. I love you.'

Slowly her feet crept down the bed and her head lifted. . . .

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"Poopie" was unique in that he needed no defenses—he moved within a schema more spacious, more joyous, and in all ways less galling than that which contains ordinary men.

PACKAGE DEAL

by Will Worthington

Somewhere it was written: *Let someone or something always intercede in behalf of Willoughby ("Poopie") Smythe-Boddo Sunnyfield IV, no matter what seeming folly be committed by him, no matter what carnage and ruin he shall leave behind, for he is no mere careless tourist of life, but a pilgrim of undeviating purpose. Pass over the wrecked cafe in Rome, the crumpled Mercedes (and the dead cows) near Cannes, the yacht spoiled on a reef off Key West; forget with a pure and special forgetfulness the unwed mothers everywhere, sitting dumbly in foreign sanatoria with their little blue-eyed "consequences." Let his elders be indulgent—they whose money is discussed in religious whispers—and let family attorneys come swiftly with discreet envelopes. Let blows be absorbed, let gaps be filled, let oil be poured upon waters churned by his passing. Above all, let no heavy or otherwise unpleasant thing descend upon that golden, crew-cut head, for he is that* Seeker *after the guilty secret objective of all men in all times—the shining, protean* Fun Thing—*and so it is meet that he shall move within a private schema more spacious, more joyous and in all ways less galling than that which contains ordinary men.*

It was hard to disbelieve in the legendary "Luck of the Sunnyfields'," especially as it applied to the scion of that terrible clan, Poopie (he moved in circles where people called each other things like that). From the ski-slopes of Switzerland to the yacht-clogged waters off Florida, people of all degrees and of varying shades of suntan had theories about it.

The affluent attributed Poopie's luck to something called "a crazy

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kind of *charm.*" Household servants, bartenders and other wage-earning folk, whom this "charm" had altogether eluded, ascribed it to Money—which view educed neatly from the rumor that the Sunnyfields had called a halt to World War II only because it had ceased to pay satisfactory dividends.

Both classes of explanation touched the truth; neither embraced it entire. For example, how account for the fact that Poopie, who held sobriety and chastity in equal contempt, suffered neither hangovers nor any diseases which could not be discussed before his oldest female relatives?

"A crazy kind of charm?" It would have had to be pretty crazy. How reconcile this "charm" theory with the fact that when Poopie's Ferrari vaulted a fence and plunged into a ravine during the *Mille Miglia,* hopeful little smiles broke out among hundreds of spectators, but when he emerged laughing from the wreckage a little cloud scudded over all their faces?

The bald economic explanation for Poopie's infuriatingly good fortune was also a gross oversimplification of the facts. A cursory examination of the Smythe-Boddo-Sunnyfields' Dun & Bradstreet file would reveal that however narrowly predatory the clan-elders may have been in their ambitions, they were not stupid. Per corollary, Poopie himself controlled not one dime of the family wherewithal. However enviable his situation may have appeared to the outsiders and havenots of the world, his real position was ignominious and even precarious. Between him and the goodies he had been conditioned to need from the day of his birth there had always stood a cordon of more or less challenging seniors. He was like a laboratory rat which must negotiate a complex maze in order to gain the objects of its desire.

Indeed, if one considers some of the attitudes which enveloped Poopie even within the bosom of his own family, one is tempted to believe that his *laissez-passer* among the dark shapes of cost and consequence which menace ordinary folk may well have been inscribed among the very stars. It may have been . . . but no such happy codicil was attached to the last will and testament of old Gramps Sunnyfield.

Jabez Sunnyfield had not kicked nearly as many puppies and kittens as people said he had, though it was true that he liked to wring the necks of barnyard fowl with his own hands at Christmas and Thanksgiving. He derived his greatest kicks, during his lifetime, from character-building disciplines—especially those which could be imposed upon others. His credo had embraced cold baths at grey, predawn hours, unpleasant

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exercises, abrasive cereals, long working days, minute gifts and gratuities with stern moral injunctions attached, and total dedication to the pursuit of wealth (to keep it out of the hands of the irresponsible and the joy-bent).

Gramps had been hard and he worshipped hardness. If he feared anything it was softness—especially if associated with pleasure. When he thought he perceived in his sons some very slight roundness of chin and liquidity of eye—dire portents of tolerance and magnanimity—he set about devising some plan for posterity whereby all softness and/or soft men would be expunged from the dynasty. He found the answer to his problem in a grim little relic called Peedmew College, which had the reputation of being the mustiest, strictest and least progressive Graeco-Roman academy east of the Rockies. Gramps, being only semi-literate and not knowing the exact meaning of the word 'classical,' was moved to profound respect by Peedmew, though he could only dimly imagine what He'd have visions of men memorizing whole books of the Old Testament in the original tongues, or perhaps translating the *Anabasis of Xenophon* into Choctaw, because he came from a generation which believed, without knowing why, that some special merit accrued to that sort of activity. How his little eyes had twinkled when he saw the shelves of dusty books, the ghostly reproductions of classical statuary (with fig-leaves dubbed in with Victorian plaster), the steel engravings of ruined temples on the walls and the creaking, gray-faced teachers with black suits and voices like stable-flies! Here was the testing flame for his sons and their progeny, if any. To hell with courses in Business Administration, Commercial Law, Accounting and Finance! The boys could develop their claws in the marketplace as he had done. Peedmew, meanwhile, would weed out the kids.

And so it did.

Two out of Gramp's five sons made it; the others were almost never discussed:

An Uncle Ferd ran away and joined an itinerant stag-show during his freshman year at Peedmew.

Uncle Nye was last seen hawking and demonstrating an obscure brand of bag-balm at a county fair in Iowa.

The body of Uncle Faunce was found lying in a gutter before a wineshop in Mexico City, in which city his remains were disposed of by municipal authorities.

Now Poopie was approaching his thirtieth year and was indeed beginning to show a certain fleshness under his jaw. Other members of the family had more than once suggested to him that the sun was getting rather high in the sky.

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Poopie deferred matriculation on one pretext after another, but the writing in Gramps' will stood out as starkly as on the day it was penned:

Graduate from Peedmew and ascend to your place in the Sunnyfield Court.

Fail and go to hell.

One day when Poopie returned from an afternoon of driving through hospital quiet zones in his vintage Bugatti with the cut-out open his father intercepted him.

"Like a word with you, Willoughby."

Poopie did not miss the ominous tone, and the use of the real first name would have been quite nasty in itself, but he made a decision for cheerfulness-right-up-to-the-end. In the afternoon's fun, in fact, he had almost put unpleasant realities out of mind altogether. Poopie had a child's power to deemphasize the negative.

"Sure thing, Flash." (Sunnyfield Senior was almost immobilized with arthritis.)

"Willoughby, I . . ." He went to the window and examined a minute flaw in the glass.

"Yes, Guv," said Poopie, readjusting his flippancy level to meet the apparent gravity of the moment.

"Willoughby, you . . ."

"Yes, Father."

"Willoughby, it occurs to me that you are twenty-nine years of age." They concurred in this. Sunnyfield Senior was a forceful man in ordinary circumstances, but he didn't know his son very well.

"Willoughby, I bought St. Ubald's for you," he said, referring to the family's last ditch solution to Poopie's prep-school certification problem. "But *now* . . ."

"P-Peedmew?" mewed Poopie, his lower lip a palsied sausage.

"Peedmew," said his father, firmer now that the matter was in the open. "Peedmew is your baby, now. Can't buy it. Can't even oil the wheels, so to speak. Can't bypass it, unless you want to spend your waning days trolling for coins under gratings." Sunnyfield Senior scrutinized his son for a fruitless moment, then continued. "Had you considered—oh, I *know* it's fantastic—but had you considered actually *trying*? Like the rest of us?" Then, "Did you hear me, Willoughby?"

Poopie's expression was disturbingly unfamiliar. He was thinking.

Even the laboratory rat, confronted with a fabricated nightmare of senseless plywood planes, flashing lights and electric booby traps, but driven by its knowledge of and need for food-pellets, sounds rodent inner space in search of new percipience, at length emerging more-than-rat.

Poopie tried to contemplate his problem directly, but it was an impenetrable absurdity. His mind, rebounding, gravitated to the most

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immediate workable contingency. For an unexamined moment it seemed to him that he returned to this more familiar plane *renewed* in some indefinable way.

"Clothes," he thought silently. It was inconceivable that one would take a new step in any direction without replenishing one's wardrobe. Sunnyfield Senior would be the first to agree. He was a man who flew to London for semi-annual fittings and employed not one but two valets to care for his clothes.

"It'll be sort of good to slop around in blue jeans and a sour sweatshirt, ya know," said Poopie, gaily and out of a clear blue sky, then he excused himself even as horrified distaste was still registering on his father's face.

Poopie's new school wardrobe, charged to Sunnyfield Senior, was calculated to make an Indian prince look like a CARE case.

Later he cornered his uncle, Polonius Smythe in the library. To Uncle Polonius he observed, "Posh place, old Peedmew, I should think. Don't know if my meagre allowance will let me keep up with those chaps. Oh well, I can always *cadge*."

Uncle Polonius had been educated in England and knew little of Peedmew's Spartan ways. Also he had a secret horror of borrowing, rooted in some old unpleasantness which the family still labored at forgetting.

In removing his checkbook, Uncle Polonius tore the lining of his jacket.

Poopie made a habit of bringing his Aunt Moira her "juice" in the mornings—a tumbler of chilled vodka with just a dash of pineapple juice "to make it look breakfasty." Aunt Moira despised her nephew—she had to despise *somebody*, and Poopie was a logical choice—but these meaner feelings were no match for the solvent power of the "juice." Besides, Poopie had the grace to look at the ceiling while she snatched the glass to her lips with both hands, and he would carry on cheerful, clattering conversation, which neatly concealed the terrible gug-gugging of her drinking and her involuntary gasps of gratitude. He would stand at the window and talk about the weather. Also he talked about the new cars.

Thus, well dressed, well funded and driving a new Bentley saloon with built-in bar, disappearing bidet and okapi-skin upholstery—a reward from Aunt Moira "for not picking his nose"—Poopie arrived on the Peedmew campus in a cloud of dust which is still remembered by local folk.

His first encounter there was with Dr. Sneedmough, Dean of Freshmen.

"We don't have cars at Peedmew," said Dr. Sneedmough

The days began with temper-

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ance lectures in chapel. Everybody took the same courses: Latin, Greek and their literatures, with all suggestions of pagan joys somehow excised. Their geometry was straight from Euclid. There was no way around these disciplines. There were no holes in their days, much less in their nights—no bright and airy spaces. The food was boiled.

By prior arrangement with Heaven, the light that filtered through the high windows was always gray, like the faces of the teachers and the other students. There was a sinister mustiness about the place—sharpest in the cell-like dormitory rooms. It was impossible to believe that any females existed on the same continent. Poopie was sure that if you stood in one of the halls, took a deep breath and said "Sex," the buildings of Peedmew would crumble like stale crackers and their occupants would run screaming as though turpentined by the imps of hell.

If Poopie had still clung to visions of living like a gang-baron seeking asylum in a monastery, the visions were dispelled during his first hour. In classes he sat numb and glassy-eyed like a man in the grip of some time-destroying drug. In the evenings he returned to his windowless cell, which he shared with a pair of steel-rimmed glasses named Howard. He gave up trying to talk to Howard after the first day. All the man could say was something like "mmnnyerrsss." Moreover, Howard studied. In an insane moment Poopie tried to follow suit. He had to do something. *Greek grammar: A comprehensive view of the euphony of consonants.*

Surely they were kidding! Where was his "Luck"—the saving thing that always happened just in time? Any time now he would wake up to the sound of Pan's flutes, and the whole grisly business would prove to have been a green-wine dream. Come on now, a joke's a joke!

But there they were—the four walls, the oppressive ceiling, Howard there looking like a gloomy swan bent over his work, the husk-dry books you couldn't even touch. Nothing changed at Peedmew. Nothing moved. There was one merciful thing about it, though: The days were so much alike that you lost track of their passing.

After one despairing look at his textbooks, Poopie took down a wall calendar and began dividing the square days into hours and the hours into quarter hours with his pencil. Then quite suddenly something cold seemed to explode just under his diaphragm and spread through his body.

"Howard?"

"Mmnnyerrssss?"

"When are midyear exams?"

"Tomorrow," said Howard, and went on studying.

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The other students actually seemed happy about it, the bloody masochists! Martyrs. Emasculation with butter-knives today, fellows—hot diggety! The incomprehensible mood only made Poopie's the darker by contrast. He had spent the night in fantasies wherein he saw himself standing on street corners in old Army clothes, wading through antiseptic foot-baths, importuning well-dressed people in the streets for pennies, accepting dimes from pink-faced men who told him to "mend his ways," and being "saved" in some humiliating fashion before amused crowds of strangers.

He found himself sitting in a one-armed chair. Before him was a blank-book and on the blackboard were a dozen questions about the structural idiosyncrasies of a mummified language. Beside the blackboard stood Professor Newby (Beg. Gr. 101) who favored them all with a thin sneer. Poopie could congratulate himself for having remembered to fill his fountain pen.

Senseless plywood planes, flashing lights and electric booby-traps. The truth which a trapped creature may learn to exact from absurdity has never been measured.

. . .

The first question on the blackboard was: *Explain how the word for 'sea' illustrates consonantal change between early and later Attic.* The other questions were no less opaque.

"This is it," thought Poopie. "Rock-bottom." He could hear secret mumbling all about him, and the sound of eager scribbling, but in that moment, oddly enough, he did not think of ways to steal a look at someone else's paper. He did not search his mind for meretricious "answers." He did not even importune his own dark gods to come to his rescue. Instead, he stared at the head of Tom Fisher who sat directly in front of him.

Nondescript hair, stringy and of no discernible color, clinging to a greyish scalp. It was a typical Peedmew head—typical because the cold shower was esteemed at Peedmew as character-building, anaphrodisiac and economical of gas, and it was often deferred. Poopie barely surppressed a tremendous explosion of laughter. Mentally he had "stepped back" to contemplate this little universe of absurdities—the sneer of Newby, which was the sneer of every petty martinet who has ever enjoyed a triumph of unpleasantness, the cryptic questions, the whole scene, in fact, and finally the back of Fisher's Peedmew head. The same absurdity permeated them all.

Defeated, the mind steps back to contemplate the Absurd; *Only then is septate reality swept away in a storm of high laughter. A door swings inward. Something enters:*

Thalassa—thalatta . . .

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But also: . . . *thah. Thah-burn—thigh-burn—thigh-bone—burn. Image of discolored flesh; taut face of doctor in white gown; knives—always knives, and little silver saws; antiseptic butcher-shop. Thigh-bone-burn-then-no-thigh yet still-burning bone. Image of wheelchair waiting — image, tone, smell, feeling of forever. No self-pity, now! Forget!* All this, but coming up clear as Chinese ink on white paper,

Thalassa—thalatta . . .

He noticed that his right hand was writing in the blankbook. He "stood aside" and did not interfere.

The next question had to do with something called "rough breathing." This time he let his eyes stray to another Peedmew head, that of Harry Barnes—just a glance, then he closed his eyes. You didn't "step aside" exactly; you just dissolved and *merged* with something.

Rough breathing: Long accented vowels—exceptions—yes, all there. *All there, standing around her bed. Oh, the rough breathing! The terrible, tearing, phlegm-choked, pain-choked breathing! Can she hear us? She cannot hear us. No more rough breathing. No more pain. No more . . .*

Then there was an essay question, a problem not merely of content but of form: *Discuss the growth of the Homeric idiom with special reference to the criteria for the selection of words and phrases.* Answer? Yes, but how? He looked at the face of professor Newby. He had never noticed how old he was.

Briefly.

Briefly, boys!

So damnably brief. Where did they go, the springy years full of fine profanity and laughter? Greece was for youth: knapsack and two hundred dollars. Why not? Was going to go. Go. Old freighter — whistles — excitement —black-haired girls, perhaps. Never did. Never. *Just steel engravings and fake plaster statues.*

It's so late! Dizzy again this morning, and that vile taste, and the pain just over the diaphragm. Briefly, boys . . .

Yes, the answers were all there. You did not snatch them out of someone's mind or out of the air; *they* rushed in upon *you*. Effortlessly you selected what you needed for your purposes, or it emerged like the numerals on a color-vision testing chart. It worked for Greek, for Latin, for mathematics and for Bible. There was no obvious limit to what you could perceive now. No limit to the answers, but something else slipped through too. Poopie felt no inclination to exult. When he turned in his last

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blankbook for the day, his hand shook so badly that the professor was alarmed.

"Are you ill, Sunnyfield?" he'd asked.

"I'll be all right," Poopie answered, but then he fled to his room where he remained, declining supper. He lay on his cot and made a conscious effort to savor some of the implications of this new thing. The monolithic problem of Peedmew itself was all but solved. It was only a matter of spending a certain amount of time there. He tried to picture himself as the Mystery man of the New York Stock Exchange. (The intentions of competitors would shine out like neon signs. It would be one Sunnyfield coup after another. No grubby research, no pouring over charts, no inspecting of ugly factories. He would drop by his office occasionally just to fondle the secretary. Veteran financiers would jump around him like spaniels. He would wear tinted glasses and cultivate a thin, cold smile.)

But such visions seemed less real to him than they would have seemed before this weird thing happened. "Wild?" "Way out?" "A gay, mad thing?" None of these terms came to his mind now. He even tried to resurrect the mood in which he and Rannie and Goo-goo and those mad Poindripter twins had poured croton oil into the wine-casks during the vendemmia at Reggio. The memory was vivid enough, but he could not identify himself with it. Some character called "Poopie" had been involved in that childish affair. He was not that person.

He was not even the defeated idler who had, a few hours ago, entered a classroom as though entering a gas-chamber at the State Penitentiary.

In time his steadiness returned somewhat. For the first time since he had come to Peedmew he wanted to talk to Howard, of all people, but Howard wasn't there. Now that midyears were over, he was probably spending the evening at chess or ping-pong or some such debauchery.

Poopie, or *Willoughby* as he now thought of himself, decided to wander around the campus. He wanted to talk to someone. The other students were an earnest lot, destined for archaeological museums and libraries of incunabula (and of dust), or for the pulpit. The idea of cultivating them had never occurred to him before.

It would be nice to take a walk on the campus—strike up a conversation, perhaps. What kept him from doing so? Twice he strode to the door of the room. Twice he returned to his worktable and sat down. He did not want to analyze his own reluctance to go outside.

When Howard returned to the

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room much later, he found Poopie . . . Willoughby . . . so absorbed in a second-year Latin textboook that he didn't even look up from the pages. Howard was understandably stunned by this development and was a little afraid to disturb him. His face was like that of a very sick person who had at last found a kind of peace in some sedative drug.

Some weeks later, Aunt Moira visited him. Her sadistic motives were scarcely concealed, but she tempered these by bringing him a pint of gin decanted into an aftershave lotion flask. Poopie thanked her with a grave smile which left her badly shaken. Their conversation was stilted and polite. Poopie decided not to mention his erie discovery to anybody.

Aunt Moira, who had been counting on his failure at Peedmew for very tangible reasons, was so shaken by the encounter that when she went home she went straight to bed with three seconals and a pint of bourbon. Poopie put the flask of gin in his steamer trunk and forgot about it.

If, when he first came to Peedmew, he had remained aloof from the other students because of their hopeless squareness, he did so now for quite different reasons. Time and again he advised himself that he should "get out more . . . Mingle with the others," but each time he retreated to his worktable and his books.

Intensity was no uncommon quality among Peedmew students, so very few people actually noticed the change in him. Some of the faculty noticed it and spoke of it briefly. Doctor Sneedmough spoke of Poopie to Professor Newby one day: "Never saw a more commendable change in a student. Dare one hope for the emergency of true intellectual passion in such an overprivileged brat, do you suppose?"

But Newby was more reserved "Seriousness is certainly appropriate to the campus," he said, "but it seems to me that the boy is carrying some great weight. With all due respect, Dr. Sneedmough, I do sometimes wonder if this is an unalloyed *good* . . ."

Howard noticed it too, but he cared little and said nothing about it to anybody. Poopie's condescensions of the first days had made a dent in his pride which he could never bring himself to dismiss.

Only once in the ensuing months did Poopie ever talk about his secret preoccupation, and even then he generalized the theme and dissociated himself from it. One early spring evening he put a question to Howard, making it sound as casual as he could:

"Howard, do you believe in thought transference?"

Howard, deep in algebra, answered grudgingly:

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"As a figure of speech, maybe. If you're talking about some kind of 'waves,' I don't buy it though."

"Why?"

Howard slapped his pencil down on the table—a display of irritation for which Poopie was wholly unprepared.

"The human mind is not a radio; it's a Pandora's box. Telepathy would be monstrous. No one could stand it."

Poopie could see that Howard didn't want to talk about it anymore, but he could no more drop the subject than he could avoid looking at new spots on his own teeth.

"I don't understand, Howard. Why monstrous?"

"If you tapped another man's mind, you'd get the full impact of his inside anguish, but you wouldn't have developed his defenses. I know it'll come as a big surprise to you, Sunnyfield, but some people have *troubles.*"

Poopie felt the silent flood of Howard's stale, pent-up resentment engulf him. It was formless and dark, and the sensation was not like a sharp blow so much as it was like being suddenly immersed in black bile. It shocked him not because of *its* abruptness but because of the suddenness with which he became aware of it. He had not suspected such feelings towards him existed anywhere, let alone in such as Howard. In that moment the need to rush outside overcame all prior reluctance to do so.

"Imagination!" he told himself. "All I needed was a little air." And the air was fine. He absorbed it in deep therapeutic gulps.

"Nonsense!" he said, half-aloud. "Must get a grip on things. Forget this mind-reading nonsense. Pure coincidence, or something in the subconscious."

For a very short time—a few seconds only—he was convinced that it *was* nonsense, that he had merely suffered from some freakish delusion. But then he said: "I've been studying. It isn't *necessary. I won't do it again.*"

Before he had time to consider the implications of his own protest, he saw Mr. Gorbel coming towards him from the administration building. Gorbel was the school treasurer, and he distinguished himself from other Peedmew men by going around with a fine, fat, fatuous realtor's smile on his face in all weathers.

"Good evening, Sunnyfield," he said as he passed.

Good evening. Evening. They'll come in the evening.—About that five thousand dollars, Gorbel. Meant to put it back—taint of urea-which-is-fear—image of grey concrete—but a man has needs—daughter—college—keep up appearances—They'll come in the evening, the auditors and tax-men—grey cement—bars—disgrace—poor family!

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It was then that Poopie broke and ran.

The men of Peedmew, students and faculty, stood or wandered around the campus singly or in small groups. There was little conversation and no one looked fixedly at another. Each seemed to be absorbed in some quiet parlour-game with the shadows behind his own eyes.

Tom Fisher, a cheerful, outdoor type who walked with a slight limp, searched his memory for its darkest passage. "TB of the bone," the Doctor had said. "May respond to the new specifics—may not." A man should prepare his mind for the worst. So you wouldn't go to Asia Minor with shovels and gunny-sacks. You'd be a desk-paleographer. What's wrong with working from a wheelchair? You'd cope. In time the infection had responded, but it had been a lousy couple of months.

Harry Barnes thought about the day his mother had died. He thought about how the bottom had dropped out of his world, and then about how he'd begun to savor the implications of her death: no ministry for him; he'd go to Chicago and teach. And that girl Mother had disliked . . . How dependent he'd been! There was the guilt, of course, but then there was that discovery: When you looked at guilt it shrank.

Old Professor Newby thought about death, but whimsically and tolerantly as though considering the foibles of an old friend. How foolish to fear, he thought, and how much more foolish to invite it. When we die, regret dies too. Meanwhile we live. Neither death nor regret have any place here at all.

Each searched among the exhibits of his own memory, and each came to rest upon a single question: Why would a man do it? He'd had everything—looks, intelligence, the promise of a vast fortune—even an odd kind of *charm*.

Why would a man in that situation drive a brand new car into a stone wall at a hundred miles an hour?

Each searched his mind for some clue to the tragedy, but no single man could envision such anguish.

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This is a story about a man named Harrington, and a cat named Finnigan who had a noticeable effect on his environment and at least two lives.

THE CAT LOVER

by Nicholas Breckenridge

I MET HARRINGTON ONLY ONCE, and somehow I don't expect our paths to cross again.

For a year or so before our encounter, I'd heard his name in conversations with our mutual friend George Levy. In addition to George, Harrington and I had in common a cleaning lady named Lavinia, a tough, stringy old woman who was ruthlessly honest in her opinions as well as her personal habits. I have known George and Lavinia for many years, and have never had occasion to doubt anything either of them has ever told me. From them, I have pieced out the story about to be related—or that part of it I didn't witness myself. The story is about a cat, and if you are a wildly dedicated cat lover, I suggest you do not read it.

A bachelor, Harrington lived alone in a small ground-floor apartment in Greenwich Village. Everything I'd heard about him led me to believe he was a pretty cold fish whose only indulgence was cats.

And he was ostentatiously unsentimental about those. He didn't talk baby talk to them, or permit them to sleep on his bed. In the years he'd lived in the city he'd run through three cats, Inagain, Carrie Chapman and, finally, Finnigan. Lavinia had endured them all. Long before I met him, she used to talk to me about Harrington's cats, lamenting the furniture they'd scratched. She couldn't understand how a man otherwise so fastidious could be so unconcerned about his cat's shedding on his chairs and scratching the woodwork.

"Mistuh Harrington's slipcover's ruined," Lavinia would announce mournfully to me.

"Hardly noticeable," Harrington would insist to George Levy.

Carrie Chapman was a rather stupid, if pedigreed Persian. Harrington didn't look forward to her coming into heat, and his appre-

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hension turned out to be justified. One night she escaped from his apartment, apparently through a window open no more than an inch and a half, and the next morning Harrington heard her keening apprehensively out in his rubbly little back yard. He peered out and saw her crouched beside the fence, surrounded by four neighborhood toms. He opened the kitchen window, and in she sprang.

But the worst had happened.

Finnigan was one of five. Harrington managed to give away the others, and Finnigan would have gone too, except that while he was still a kitten, Carrie Chapman came into heat again and left on another streetwalking expedition —this time never to return.

Finnigan's father failed to leave a mark on his appearance. The kitten had Carrie's luxuriant pinkish-orange fur, yellow eyes, and great thick bottlebrush of a tail. But where Carrie had been selfish and placid, Finnigan was lively and intelligent and crawling with charm.

He was knockkneed, and this gave him a funny chorus-boy's walk. He loved to lie in a big wing chair facing the hearth of Harrington's little fireplace, blinking his eyes in a straight-faced parody of understanding as Harrington talked to him, raking the upholstery with the long claws of his forefeet. According to Lavinia, Finnigan had managed to run through two tough twill slipcovers before he was a year old.

Finnigan would submit to caresses from other people, with a taut, exaggerated air of patience; and he never purred, except when Harrington or Lavinia stroked him. Finnigan's favorite foods were cantaloupe melon and a cat food we shall call Brand X.

It was at the end of their second year together that Harrington noticed that Finnigan seemed uncomfortable. His ears would flatten back against his head, and he would move in a spavined, halting gait, as if his hips were broken and had been badly wired. Something inside was hurting, and his anger, his frustration, were evidenced in the querulous sound of his mewing. He stalked the little apartment in some anxious private search. His body would contract with shudders. One day Harrington saw blood on the newspapers in his box.

The veterinary kept nodding maddeningly as Harrington explained the cat's symptoms. Yes, he'd seen a good deal of the same trouble lately. "It's probably a condition called cystitis, caused by a deposit of stones in the bladder. Do you feed him a canned food called Brand X? . . . That's probably it. Too many bones. Calcium builds up and can't be absorbed. I'll catheterize the animal, but it's not a guarantee that the

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condition won't return. And sometimes it just goes away. But no more Brand X. Liver!"

Harrington lifted Finnigan out of his box.

"Organ meats! Kidney! No fish! No milk!"

Harrigan stroked Finnigan reassuringly as the cat gazed around the office with narrowed eyes.

"If the trouble recurs," the vet was saying, "the cat should be destroyed."

Harrington returned three days later to pick up Finnigan, who seemed quite chipper, and was obviously glad to see him.

Lavinia, who shopped for Harrington, bought fresh organ meats three or four times a week and received strict instructions not to feed Finnigan the prohibited foods.

But the symptoms returned in two weeks' time. Finnigan bled, and his eyes blinked in pain. He chased himself, with frantic, convulsive movements as he tried to bite at the hurt. He ate almost nothing, and all his charm and independence seemed to collapse inward. His strength failed. When he sat in his favorite chair by the fireplace and tried to sharpen his claws, his efforts were a travesty of his former prowess. The nap of the slipcover was hardly roughened.

Finnigan's eyes grew cloudy and hostile. He tried to hide himself in dark places. Another catheterization produced only temporary relief. Harrington took the cat to another vet, who gave it injections and received a bad scratch under his left eye.

The injections had no effect. Finnigan continued to decline. Harrington disliked having to leave him alone in the apartment during the days, and disliked having to return at night to find the cat hiding in a closet or under the bed, panting and miserable. Lavinia nearly refused to work in the apartment any longer, so dominated was it by the sick animal.

Harrington debated having the cat "put away," but the impersonality of that act made him recoil, and there were still occasions when Finnigan would make some shadow of an overture to him, and act as if he might get better. But he didn't, and as he declined, Harrington's nerves went to pieces. He took Finnigan to the original vet one Saturday, but the cat was so violent and anguished on being left that Harrington put him back in the box and returned home.

That night, Finnigan's howling and panting seemed to be more desperate than ever, and Harrington realized that he was going to have to do something about it, all by himself, and right now.

He thought of chloroform, but he didn't know where he could get it at this hour, or how he'd go

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about administering it, or how long it took to have its effect. It occurred to him that New York was a hard place to kill an animal.

As he was running tapwater into his fifth tumbler of whiskey, the idea came to him, the simple, classical, obvious idea: How did you kill a cat? You drowned it. It would be over in seconds, and the emotional strain involved in doing it himself seemed somehow appropriate. Finnigan had been brave for weeks; certainly he himself could be brave for a minute or two. At a delicatessen around the corner he obtained a burlap sack. Returning with it to the apartment, he lifted Finnigan gently from the kitchen floor and carried him down to the basement. He set the cat down on the drainboard and ran a washtub full of cold water, high, up to the taps.

He held the sack open on the drainboard. Perhaps Finnigan thought it was a game, perhaps he was too sick to care, or perhaps he really knew, and wanted it to happen. At any rate, tail erect, eyes preternaturally bright, Finnigan walked into the mouth of the sack, as if to see whether that dark interior was where his pain and trouble lay.

Harrington closed the neck of the sack. Squeezing it as hard as he could, he plunged it into the tub. There was a terrible thrashing in the water. Harrington realized his eyes were closed, his teeth clenched, and that he was standing as far away from the tub as he was able to and still hold the dreadful burden under the water. He had no idea how long it was before the struggles subsided and he turned and looked down at the sack eddying limply in the tub. The water sloshed gently back and fourth.

His right hand was stiff with the effort of his grip as he let slip the neck of the sack. The thought occurred to him then that he had made no plans to handle the remains. Perhaps he could get the body cremated. But right now he knew that he could not bear to touch or even look at what he had done. He started up the stairs two at a time, but halfway up the thought of that poor bagged body floating somewhere between the bottom of the tub and the water's surface drove him to turn and go down again.

Without looking, Harrington reached into the hateful water and pulled the plug. Then he went upstairs to his apartment.

It happened that I was sailing for Europe on business the next afternoon, and that night I was being dined and bon voyaged by the Levys. About one o'clock in the morning, as I was preparing to leave, their telephone rang, and after a quick, puzzled frown toward his wife, George answered it. It was Harrington, drunk as a lord, and filled with guilt and an over-

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powering need to tell someone what he'd done. This he did, at some length, to the accompaniment of a sympathetic obligato of reassuring sounds from George, who finally persuaded him to go to bed.

Shortly after my return from Europe, George called on me and asked if I'd like to accompany him on a visit to Harrington's apartment. I said I would.

Harrington turned out to be a rather shy, contained man of perhaps forty five. His apartment was neat and pleasant, and I could detect the dedicated hand of Lavinia on the gleaming brass andirons of the fireplace and the rich lustre of the wide pine plank floors. I recognized the two comfortable-looking wing chairs on either side of the fireplace from the descriptions I'd gleaned from George and Lavinia. As I made a move toward the one on the left, Harrington raised a hand.

"Not that one, please. It's—Finnigan's."

I nodded in embarrassed sympathy, and sat down on the edge of a couch. My feeling was one of deference to an understandable idiosyncrasy: if a man wants to maintain a particular piece of furniture as a memorial to a dead pet, I feel its his own business.

"I just had it re-covered a month ago." Harrington seemed to speak with a kind of admiration as he rubbed a fussy hand over the slipcovered arm of the chair. "And it's fraying already. That animal's strength is amazing." He shook his head and disappeared into the kitchen to make drinks.

As Harrington left the room, George and I looked at each other rather oddly. Then he rose to examine the cat's chair. His eyebrows went up as he bent over the arm, and he turned to beckon me. I went over and looked at the chair arm. It was scratched and worn, a sharp contrast to the crisp newness of the rest of the slipcover, which was marred only by the presence of a thin matting of fine reddish cat hairs on the seat.

"What the hell?" I said. "I thought he'd drowned it." And Lavinia wouldn't allow all this hair, I thought.

"Maybe he's got another one," George said. "But he mentioned Finnigan by *name* just then. Shh, here he comes."

"I gather you've heard about my cat," Harrington said to me as he entered the room and set the drinks down on a coffee table.

I told him I had, and that I sympathized.

"I thought I'd lost him there for a while," he said.

It was not an easy remark to respond to. I looked at George.

"Nick's been away in Europe," George explained. "As a matter of fact, the night before he sailed he was at my house. It was the night you phoned, after you'd—done it."

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Harrington shook his head reminiscently.

"You did drown him, didn't you?" I'm sure I sounded rather dubious.

A small, mirthless grin showed itself on Harrington's face. "I did and I didn't. You see, it didn't work."

I looked at George; his face was curiously watchful.

"You mean he recovered?"

"Oh yes. Hasn't our Lavinia told you? Physically he's in fine health."

I shook my head and explained I'd only just returned and hadn't gotten around to calling Lavinia yet.

"Oh, well, then you don't know the most dramatic part of the story. After I'd let the water out of the tub and telephoned the Levys, I went to bed. The next morning was Saturday. Usually I sleep late on Saturday, but I realized one of the other tenants might go down to the basement ahead of me, so I set my alarm for seven and drank myself to sleep. My God, the dreams! Guilt, pursuit, fear—a psychoanalyst's field day. Well, I got some sleep, and was up half an hour before the alarm rang. Still drunk and depressed, I went directly down to the basement.

"The sack lay, wet and flat, on the bottom of the tub. Shapeless. Empty . . ." (As he warmed to his story, I realized it had the practiced, professional tone of being an oft-told tale.) "I stood very still," he went on. "My first impulse was that I must have blacked out somehow, that I had already disposed of the body. But while I stood there, the whole scene of the night before came sharply to my mind.

"And right then I heard a sound, a thin, hideous sound that made me think of a snake. I looked down. There was a damp spot at my feet. I stepped back. Finnigan was there, underneath the tubs, his pink hair gnarled and tufted where it had dried unlicked." Harrington passed a hand over his eyes. "It was terrible, dreadful. He lay without moving, his eyes slitted, his head raised a fraction of an inch from the cold concrete floor. As I looked at him, he made that awful sound again, a sort of hiss. I was horrified. The end of that ratty tail flicked infinitesimally against the floor, and his haunches tightened almost imperceptibly. I didn't know if he was gathering for a spring, or what.

"I turned and simply ran up the stairs. Lavinia was due that afternoon, and by the time she arrived I was so potted I could scarcely babble out what had, uh, happened."

Harrington shook his head. "It took three days to coax Finnigan out of the basement. Lavinia finally did it. That was three months

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ago. I called on the vet, and told him what had happened, and a little while later I called him to report that the symptoms of the cystitis had cleared up entirely. The vet can't account for it. Sometimes the deposits in the bladder simply break up and dissolve away. It's possible, I suppose, that Finnigan's—uh, immersion was a factor in clearing up the condition, and that's some comfort for me, I suppose. But I haven't actually managed to *touch* the poor beast since that night. And I've never seen him really sound asleep, either. He just sits and stares at me . . ." Harrington trailed off miserably.

"Where's the cat now?" George asked him gently.

"Oh, probably out in the back yard. He shows no inclination to run away, and I feel it's hardly right to try to find another home for him. He's really quite alienated from the *pet* status by now. It's as if he were on earth for the sole purpose of hating me. We sit by the fire, and he's very decorative still, with his great tail swishing back and forth. And I can be *positive* he's dozing, but when I look directly at him, those big yellow eyes are staring right into mine. And if I make an overture toward him, Finnigan hisses or backs away . . ." Harrington sighed and rose. He signalled us to follow him out to the kitchen.

"He has access to the back yard," he said, indicating a hinged wooden panel in place of one of the panes in the window over the sink. Pushing the panel out, he leaned toward the opening. *'Puss, Puss, Puss?"* He called. In a moment he let the panel fall back into place. "No use. Of course, I'll never have another cat in here. He's a complete loner by now."

We returned to the living room. "I'm sorry you couldn't see him. Lovely animal, even if he is poor company. And he's still young. There's no reason to think he won't live a long, long time." Harrington dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, as if to rub out the cat's existence.

And it was on that note that George and I said our goodbyes.

A few days later, in my apartment, I was watching Lavinia dust books. I told her I'd met Mr. Harrington, and that he'd told me what happened after he'd tried to drown his cat.

"What was that?" Lavinia asked me.

"Why, that the cat recovered, and that he's pretty difficult to live with, pretty bitter."

"You see that cat?" Lavinia asked me, doggedly polishing backstraps.

I said I hadn't.

"Mister B., that cat ain't bitter about *nobody* no more. That cat ain't *there*. I found that cat in the tub, and I th'ew the carcass right out into the garbage. If Mr. Har-

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rin'ton want to go aroun' croonin' to that poor dead thing, and puttin' out livers and lights into little dishes . . ."

"But Lavinia," I interrupted. "I was there. I saw the big wing chair. The slipcover looked new—and Mr. Harrington *said* it was—" (Lavinia nodded.) "—and yet the arm was almost in tatters. And the seat was covered with—"

"I don't bother that chair, and it don't bother me." Lavinia seemed quite agitated. "That's the deadest, drownedest cat I ever see. Ain't *no* cat in that house. You say they's cat hairs, scratch marks, on the new cover for Finnigan's chair. I say my church don' teach nothin' about ghost cats—an' I'm much too old to be fixin' to find out now."

I myself am not nearly so definite about which reality I believe in; as Harrington said, however, Finnigan does seem destined—one way or another—to live a long, long time.

Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot: XLI

On July 4th, 2007, Ferdinand Feghoot addressed the D.A.R.'s National Convention, hastily substituting for Robert A. Heinlein, who had been delayed on the Moon. Not knowing that his audience expected a more appropriate theme, he spoke on the many new nations of Africa.

"And in conclusion," he finally remarked, "I must mention the fascinating Republic of Gnus. We all know how, after the African bomb tests, the intelligence of the gnus suddenly rose to the human level, and how they organized and were admitted to the U.N. We know about their already great contributions to speculative philosophy and the arts of government. But few of us are aware of their tragedy— for the gnus soon learned that they have no aesthetic sense whatsoever. This made them feel deeply inferior. After years of searching, they shouted with joy when a young male showed signs of a singular genius for arranging glazed ceramic squares in pleasing patterns which were then made permanent with cement. They called me to examine this prodigy, and I gave him every imaginable test. But he was not truly talented. It was sadly indeed that I rendered my verdict—"

At this point, the President General leaned over to say that he should at least end his speech patriotically. "A simple slogan will suffice, dear Mr. Feghoot," she whispered.

"—Typical gnu and tiler too!" shouted Ferdinand Feghoot.

—GRENDEL BRIARTON (*with thanks to J. C. Owens*)

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As a civilization ages, its capacity for love diminishes, and there comes a time when new blood, even strange blood, may be the only hope for the future. . . .

THE ZOOKEEPER

by Otis Kidwell Burger

I WAS WITH HER ALMOST TWO months, over there. She had been divorced earlier that summer, and was living alone in a house by the sea; a big house with sliding doors and many porches, that opened on all sides. At night, when I came for her, she would slip out of a door and cross the dunes to the whitehard beach; a ghost in her pale, blowing nightgown and long fair hair, her lids still closed in sleep. How beautiful, in the anarchy of moonlight, beside the glistening tumult of the sea; she walked as gracefully as the blowing dune grass; and it seemed to me as much a dream, almost, as it was to her. To walk, to run, beside this will-less, dreaming spirit, in a world carved of light and shadow and wind; to know she followed me, unknowing, and would remember me, awake, only as a troubling shade . . .

And so, though I had been given only a month, I prolonged it. I had been in too many times and places, perhaps. This was peace and magic. Was it the light, or herself? . . . Something so still and sweet, so humble and yet proud; for all her recent hurt, even in sleep, she carried herself with a kind of joy. The light within.

Later, on stormy nights, in the moon's dark, I would lead her into the ocean itself, and there we would lie, under the boiling surface of the water, rocked in the ocean that has been Mother to how many planets. She like a drowned mermaid, with her fair hair streaming in the dark glossy water, and I, I, not daring even then to touch her. What must she have thought of this, awake? A confused sound of waters, fish, surf, but never me. How could she know I was there? Daylight logic would have ruled me out.

The month passed, the moon turned toward its second darkness. She was mine, and it was time to

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go. Was I glad or sorry? She was lovelier, and wiser, than any of the others I had seen; I had chosen well. Few would miss her. And I? I should be glad to have her there with me. Yet, it would never be like that again.

You understand, I am not used to talking about myself, or about things that move me. My life has been with animals; I am accustomed to touch, to sound, as communication. Another so like myself made me awkward. Except when she slept. And awake, of course, she would not look at me. . . . Should I say, I loved her with my whole soul? They say I have none. Yet, these are the nearest words.

Ruth awoke abruptly in a large building full of corridors and windows. She had apparently fallen asleep over her desk, the only one in that room, and she wondered, first, what she had been working on, and, second, where she was. Then, seeing that after six weeks of exceptionally confused dreams, she had finally come into a clearer one, she got up to explore.

The building had apparently been recently swept . . . of people as well as dust, she thought. In its antiseptic, geometrically-precise corridors, her heels clicked overloudly, echoing emptiness. She saw that she was dressed in a grey suit, one she did not remember; the long blonde fall of her hair had been unpinned. She looked for something . . . an elastic band . . . to tie it back, but there was nothing on the desks. No paper, no pens, no ledgers. Nothing.

On one side of the long row of offices, windows overlooked a kind of park; on the other were various doors; some of which seemed to be elevators. There were no buttons; but Ruth, standing beside the nearest door, and wishing now for a White Rabbit, key, bottle, or whatever Alice had used to escape into her garden, was presently rewarded when the door slid open, revealing what looked like an ordinary elevator; and, after a moment's hesitation, committed herself to its little prison, and slid slowly downward. The ground-floor door, the other end of the time-trap, all solid metal and bars, gave her her first (and only) moment of panic; how could she open it? . . . and the obedient car leapt upward again.

Her wild thing's panic was so dense that, although I had half-expected it, it startled me. The car was nearly past me before I could arrest it and step in beside her. She did not see me; who sees another rider in an elevator? Who sees me? But I, watching the curve of her averted cheek, felt the waves of her subsiding terror as if they were that ocean that once . . . Oh, never mind. That was past.

Crossing the ground-floor corri-

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dor with restrained haste . . . the last barrier to freedom . . . she pushed open the glass doors, and stood outside the building. Before her stretched a very wide avenue, lined with young trees, and, on the opposite side, a wire fence paralleling the avenue. Inside the fence, in various browsing attitudes, stood several of the animals . . . a giraffe, as I remember, two horses, a tiger, several lambs, a couple of lions, and several others for which she had no names.

I had expected her to be astonished; perhaps, for the first instant, she was. Then, stretching out her hand, she laughed softly, and said, with that air of childlike wonder, "The Peaceable Kingdom; what else?" and, walked across the empty highway.

The horses looked up, from scratching each other's backs, and a piglet began to squeal, running in circles, but subsided. It is not so when the Others visit; the animals generally run away together, or freeze into the self-conscious attitudes of something about to be photographed. I think it embarrasses them to be found in these odd, unnatural groupings. They remember that it was not always so, and are not sure why it should be now, except that, as for most immigrants, being together in a new land is a stronger bond than the old hates. In any case, they did not run away from Ruth. Perhaps they knew that she, too, was an immigrant.

She came toward them slowly, her hair, and the scarf at her neck, blowing softly. Even in daylight, I saw, there was an airy, moonlight shine to her. And then she noticed that one of the lions had reached its paw through the fence, and, as cats will, had caught its claw in something, and either could not, or was too lazy, to pull it loose.

After a moment, "But it is a dream," she said, laughing; and going up to the lion, disengaged its great, soft pads. "Androcles," she said, a god I do not know. But the lion, too lazy to be grateful, walked away and flopped onto a sandy patch beside one of the lionesses. Four little lambs ran over, and began to lick Ruth's hand through the fence. I had put a salt lick on the hill for them, two months earlier, but sheep, for some reason, seem to prefer the salt of the flesh.

"The babies," she said, patting their soft curls. "The sweet babies." Another word I was not sure of; but her delight in these as yet imperfect animals touched feelings strange to me. I walked aside from her for a little distance. Every spring, here, there are the young animals that come as a sort of natural secretion from some of the older animals; also, sometimes some of the older animals turn stiff and cold, no longer run

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around, and must be removed. I know the names of these phenomena, but they are alien to me. There are no new Others; their endings are secret. And I am an exceptional case.

While I was standing apart, under a flowering tree, the street car came along. The street car belongs to the collector, RX. He is wealthy, of very old family, and so can afford to collect in one of the oldest periods, which is why, in fine mornings, he rides the street car, dressed in a business suit, instead of travelling in any of the more fashionable styles.

To Ruth, of course, the appearance of a street car was perfectly normal. She expected it to stop, so of course it did (or perhaps RX stopped it; I thought later that perhaps he had come along deliberately, in order to be the first to see her. After all, she was partly in his field.)

I climbed on just behind her, and took a seat toward the front. She, like a schoolgirl, stared at RX, delighted to see another human being; but, too shy to sit next to him, she sat across the aisle. (I must say here, that RX is very handsome. His features are strong; the nose particularly aquiline, the chin forceful; and his studies have given him an amused, tolerant air that immediately won Ruth's trust.) She looked at him first for himself, next to see if he was carrying a newspaper. But no; he had a book. Still, even that would tell her something, she realized. RX obligingly dropped the book so that it skidded near her. She returned it, and they fell to talking about the weather; then RX, helping her, asked if she would like to see the book. She took it with shaking hands, and turned to the flyleaf.

"Copyright, 1965
2nd printing, 1967 . . ."

Her eye skipped to the next line.

"Reprinted SPX 2 @ NB IV"

How her heart fell! She had not expected a new system of numerals. But then,

"1st restoration, 17,035." Her heart skipped like a lamb; her dismay cried, "Where? When?" over that abyss of time too deep even to be felt. But all she said was, politely,

"Do they restore these books very often?"

"Ah," RX said, "That's a sore point among collectors. We feel that it would be better if they were left as originally written, that restoration destroys certain qualities. But even ideas wear out in time, my dear. Our printers are most careful to replace the worn spots with words or paragraphs that fit the original as closely as possible . . . but it is patchwork at best."

When was the last restoration? What time is it now? Ruth cried to herself, her hands clasped, her pale hair blowing in the wind from the open window, but too polite to speak.

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". . . no more than you could read Anglo Saxon," RX said.

They talked in this polite vein all the way to the City. If Ruth noticed that there was no driver to the streetcar, I think she merely assumed I was the driver. And who notices the driver?

RX was delighted with her, as who would not be? She sat so prim, hands folded, eyes alight, not believing but happy to be on an adventure, and to have found a friend. Unafraid because she still (or at least partly) thought it was a dream. The human mind is reluctant to change its delusions.

Was it when she first saw the City that she *knew*? . . . No, only the Others know anything at once. But Ruth, staring out at that skyline, saw it new and real for me, too; the soaring glass, the great winged horizontals, miles wide; in the sunlight, a thing of prisms, reflections, rainbows, a dream too perfect to be dream. And yet, it is a dead city. The Others have forgotten, do not care about building; They live here like animals in an adopted burrow. The City is a monument and a convenience . . . a Mausoleum, I almost said, as any city is which has outlasted both builders and use by several thousand years.

RX acknowledged my presence by one thought-flick, as he parked the streetcar at the City's outskirts. ". . . you come, too." Did he still think she would turn on him, and rend him? But I must be patient with him; collectors so rarely deal with anything live. And I was glad to be still with her, to see her entry into the overpowering heights and depths of the City. After all this time, I am still afraid, which is part of my heritage; but she, if she is light-years more ignorant, is sitll one of Them, and walks like Them, sure, if not of her welcome, at least of her right. And, if she knew by now that she was a child, she at least entered with a child's grace and trust, beautiful and wondering. And I, knowing, turned away my face.

They gave her many parties, and, after awhile seeing that she was safe, sent me away. So for awhile I did not see her. I can only guess how she walked among Them, wondering. How could she know?

Having conquered Time and Space, They have now returned to them, as children do to long-forgotten toys. The collectors of string, match-boxes, old bottle-caps, have finally inherited the earth, and the City, built in the first star-reaching flush of power, has now become a dusty antique shop stuffed with every period Man ever knew. People in queer costumes parade the streets; the Old Vehicles Club has outings along Sp@ Ave. (and only They, who can control time and motion, could keep Anglo-Saxon carts and Hexabiles from the 4th archy go-

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ing at the same pace). Early atomic generators sit in back gardens, painted white and planted with flowers from planets further than eye can see. Ancient machines and domestic utensils are set with rare radioactive elements to become lighting fixtures (They can turn any form of energy to another).

And do They need to see at all, really? There are times when I have wondered whether Their deliberate keeping of day and night is not merely another anachronism; to a mind that sees without the need of eyes, ears, nose, etc., is Day really necessary? No, not toys; for all Their inward sight, They seem to need, now, to grope among the familiar forms of the human race, like creatures blind, touching something reassuring in a vast oncoming dark.

All this, of course, Ruth could not know. What was behind her in time, she recognized as old, but everything else was new. Seeing Them among the spoils of 18,000 centuries, believing all this Their work, she was awed, enchanted, worshipful. Even the one-legged sidewalk artist, scrawling 'All my own work' beside drawing chalked on broken flagstones, was better off than They, but how could she know? To Ruth, the child of a race in childhood, this was a dazzling glimpse of her race's destiny.

Well, perhaps as a cosmic joke, it was. What more fitting for the human race than to be buried in possessions; in glass barrows lined with impediments, its grave markers the rusty propellers of space ships and the scalps of colonial races?

Forgive my anger. I am thinking of her walking among Them, wondering, delicate, like any other pet deer. Poor Ruth. She thought she was a child to be educated, but I knew better. Her joy was a surprise to Them, and wakened nerves long dead. They delighted in her delight, and took longer than I had expected to tire of watching her astonishment, listening to her questions. Thinking this to be a probationary period, she asked many questions, and blossomed, reached, over-reached, so far that I feared for her health; she burned like a candle (another of RX's anachronisms), until finally I had to ask him to take better care of her. He looked thoughtful.

"She does not realize her position?"

"No. And don't tell her; it will come soon enough. But meanwhile, feed her a diet she's accustomed to, let her sleep. Her metabolism. . . ." etc. The rudimentary sciences which, being permitted, I am ashamed of.

Once only during that time, I met her, by accident. Some of Them had taken her to the country, where I too happened to be, in pursuit of my duties (on a field trip). I saw the party sitting by

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the banks of a stream; They in full costume, some with sunshades and long skirts, some in casual costumes of other centuries. I would have gone away, but Ruth, seeing me, ran up, her hands full of wildflowers.

"Oh, you . . ." She stopped, confused. It was the first time she had ever seen me; and, like her, I could not think why it had happened. She was in white, a costume from a period with long skirts and low bodices, but all I could think of was that time by the sea. Which she could not. So we stood, puzzled, in the sunlit meadow, until she recollected herself, and said,

"But I don't know your name."

"Sam." There was more to that name which They had given me, but I didn't want to tell her that yet.

"I'm Ruth . . . Sam . . . How funny. What I wanted to ask you was names. None of Them seems to know the names of these flowers. Isn't it queer? I suppose They're so far beyond. But to live in the midst of all this. . . ." she gestured widely, scattering flowers; kneeling, we picked them up, and she apologized. "But in all this beauty, and not even give it a name . . ."

"Do names mean so much to you?"

"Not exactly. But it makes me uneasy to live in a universe without personalities. . . . I've always put such care into naming even kittens."

"Kittens?"

"Young . . . young cats. You do know what cats are?" I nodded . . . young, that word again; and looked past her to Them, sitting on the grass like beings carved from metal. Stiff already, could They ever turn stiffer and not run? It was just as unthinkable that They would have young or be like this, on hands and knees before me, gathering flowers, chattering off a thousand depths and surfaces. Supple.

I told her the names I knew, and after a moment she sat back on her heels, regarding me gravely. "But you are different, Sam." I bowed my head; I had heard that before. "Why do you know things They don't . . . or rather, why do you care about them?"

But then They called her, and she thanked me, and ran off, so white against the green grass and flowers that I closed my eyes. Poor Ruth. Poor pet deer.

I did not see her again until after the scandal broke.

Up until then, perhaps They had even considered keeping her among Them, as people once kept cats. But RK fell in love with her.

To take her home as part of his collection—yes, They would have understood that; she belonged to his period. But to love her, to want to marry her? Even I could only

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guess at the underground course his eccentricity had run, undermining his training by a long immersion in the past, until he, like me, could begin to see her appeal as a living being, a wondering, loving, breathing . . . Never mind. To Them, it was shocking.

Those who had petted her turned first against her. I don't think RX saw how They hated her, but Ruth did; I saw her a few times, and recognized in her face (and how much more in her mind) the terrified appeal of someone hated, not for what he is, but for what he represents. And, poor Ruth, she did not even know what she represented to Them. But I did. For RX, honored, powerful, to fall in love with her . . . But give him credit. Eccentricity it may have been, but he did not see, in his centuries-old habit of overriding obstacles, that his love meant her death.

For They are a cruel and logical people. Would she move up Their scale? Then she must be judged by Their laws, and must pass what They had passed through (which is why one never saw Their young, in the days when They had them, until after), because Their birth began not in fact, but after passing a ritual coming-of-age decision, on Their fitness to live.

Which for a people with an indefinite life expectancy is naturally important.

Most ritual decisions carry the barbaric trappings of their origins. And, if most of Their lives are spent in ways unimaginable to someone like me, Their rituals are stolen from all cultures and religions, and go back to pasts as savage as mine, as the roots of the human mind itself.

So see my Ruth on that day . . . or, rather, evening . . . standing at the bottom of a flight of stone steps, in the darkened temple. A vast stone darkness, that swells from underground shadow into the torch-lighted apex: a double flight of steps, brooded over by the beast-faced human-bodies deities of races whose very temples are long since dust; at the summit, the altar, and the priest in a hawk mask. Their women are sitting above her, all around, a wall of hating, envious eyes, and all painted like masks, Their hair elaborately curled, Their lips and cheeks reddened, Their eyes drawn round with black. Ruth dressed in a grey robe that covers her bright hair, stands below, anxious, bewildered.

I do not think, even then, that she knew who she was, or what she had done, in Their eyes. And, as the chanting died, she cast one wild look around, and began to climb the steps slowly. I, the gods help me, began to climb behind her. If They killed me for sacrilege, it no longer mattered. I wanted only to be there to catch

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her, when They reached verdict, and struck her down. My teeth chattered from the cold. In the torchlight, I saw my grotesque shadow climb before me, just touching her slight figure, two steps beyond. The tears running down my cheeks.

At the top she stopped, turned; a mute appeal. The eyes blazed back at her, as fierce as shields in sunlight.

Then, at the last moment, the oldest of Them saw me, and stood.

"No, wait."

I sensed what was coming.

"No. Wait. Let her sentence be . . . to mate with Sam."

As if bells of noiseless laughter had been loosed; deafening. All I could think of was Ruth's shame. But how could she know? Our two species were different long ago, but in time mine came to resemble Theirs, and Ruth's, which is perhaps why They killed the rest of mine long ago, and kept only me. Perhaps They were afraid the barrier between the species might be crossed, that there might be interbreeding. But me They kept. Who else could communicate with the other animals, run the Zoo, collect specimens . . . like Ruth?

"Sam?" she asked, puzzled, incredulous; and then, as she turned to where I stood, in misery, I saw it in her eyes. Not anger, only the bewilderment of a child who after a long scolding has been suddenly given exactly what it wanted; and understanding nothing, forgetting everything, remembers only its own gladness.

"Sam." She came down the two brief steps, into my arms.

Her touch, her softness, in that cold place scarred with the hates of millennia . . . Feeling the quickness with which she sloughed terror, as if death itself were a light thing compared to love, I knew for the first time that They could fail. Another's taboos meant nothing to the ignorant. Loving, she escaped Their shame; and I, for the first time proud of my difference, was free.

Does she remember me as so long the intruder in her dreams? I think not. We live in peace, alone with the sun, and each other.

Alone, did I say? Except for the animals; they follow her day-long. I am constantly tripping over them, or having to shoo them out of the unfinished house.

"It is Eden," she said one day, "only we have come back, armed with sin and knowledge."

A funny remark, from my innocent Ruth. How much, after all, I know and must hide from her. For, since the barrier between the species no longer exists, I have begun to wonder if this is what They intended for her all along. What way was left to reenter the universe, save through the children of Ruth, the child-human, and Sam, the Ape?

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If you will grant the gentleman one simple little premise, he can mount a most persuasive argument for the nonexistence of intelligent life anywhere in the universe besides that on Earth.

CLOSING TIME

by Kris Neville

CHARLEY'S BAR AND GRILL WAS a businessman's bar in a University town. Students who came in occasionally were not encouraged by the service to return. Charley felt that the town should have at least one gathering place where a man could relax from the cares of the day, meet his equals, and discuss, without contradiction, affairs of state. Cigars were smoked as often as cigarettes; professorial pipes were not uncommon.

Charley ran a quiet bar. In the lulls of conversation, the ornamental clock could be heard, ticktock, telling the way toward eternity.

Each man knew his neighbor in Charley's Bar, and Charley knew them all. More likely than not, he would have their drinks poured before they were comfortably seated. He cashed their personal checks and extended them credit.

Talk was always the order of the evening and the essence of the mutual contract. Low talk, soft talk, seldom solving any of life's riddles, intently propounded. The bar was the social bridge between the University and the business community There, the leaders met, worked out their conflicts of interest over a congenial glass, and departed friends.

At this bar, on this night, there were three friends and a stranger. Because of the recent publicity on flying saucers, talk swung to the possibility of intelligent life on other planets.

The stranger, who introduced himself as Ed Trevalyn, entered the conversation. The atmosphere encouraged such intrusions and forgave them.

"It seems to me," he said, "that one should be able logically to answer the question once and for all: to prove it one way or the other. By logical deduction."

This was regarded by the three businessmen as an arrant piece of

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nonsense. Mr. Earles, the stockbroker, drained his glass and signaled for a refill. He rose to the bait.

"You could," he said, "easily prove that intelligent life existed. You could produce it. Here is a man, let us say, from Mars. He walks in the door; he convinces us of his origin."

"That," said Mr. Trevalyn, "would be difficult to do, particularly if he looked like us."

They all paused to speculate.

"But it could be done," said Mr. Cowles, editor of the local paper.

"If he had some kind of proof," said Mr. Trevalyn. "Some kind of irrefutable proof. But what kind would we accept?"

But Mr. Earles was not to be diverted from his premise. He interrupted: "But the reverse. Now, how could you prove that? That out of all the billions of stars in the universe that none could contain intelligent life? I mean, really prove. Certainly it seems likely that somewhere—"

"Forgive me," said Mr. Trevalyn. "I recognize the problem. But I believe I can prove to you logically—or rather, granting one questionable premise, I could prove to you logically—that we are the only intelligent life in the universe."

After a moment, Mr. Thorne, the insurance agent, said, "I'll stake a drink on that."

"And I," said Mr. Earles.

"And I," said Mr. Cowles.

The clock ticked away, ticktock, while Charley silently polished the bar. "You're on," said Mr. Trevalyn, lighting a cigar. "Now, bear with me for a moment—"

The three businessmen turned in unison to nod at the door. Entering was a newcomer whom they had seen before but not met. Charley said, "Good evening, Dr. Ashenback."

"Will you grant that intelligent life, if it has anything in common, has in common the characteristic of curiosity?"

The three men, feeling perhaps that this was the single premise they had promised to grant, thought for a moment.

"Go on," said Mr. Earles.

"Good. Now, intelligent life is curious and likes to tinker. If a thing is possible to do, somewhere, sometime, someone will do it. Out of the aeons of time which have gone before us—out of the billions, literally billions of places life could flourish—somewhere, sometime, if a thing were possible to do it would have been done."

Mr. Towne, out of instinct, half formed a protest.

Mr. Cowles, however, was anticipating what would follow. "What you're going to say is, that if travel between stars were possible, quickly and economically, it would have been done, and hav-

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ing been done, would have been taught—so that all intelligent life eventually would come into the knowledge. So that long ago we should have been visited and invited into the Community. . . . But there are a number of logical objections, sir. The universe is truly immense—our racial history is but the wink of an eye. Earth could go overlooked for a millennium, even if the rest of the universe were literally crawling with life." He sat back, pleased with himself.

"No," said Mr. Trevalyn, "this is not my line of thought. Gentlemen: you're familiar with the first law of thermodynamics?"

"Of course," said Mr. Earles: "Energy can neither be created nor destroyed."

At this point, Dr. Ashenback, sitting a few stools away, joined them and introduced himself around. He was, he explained, an exchange Professor from Princeton. He had stopped in for a short drink while waiting for the completion of an experiment. He was brought up to date on the discussion.

The three businessmen, feeling that in the professor they had found an ally, asked if he would like to be included in the wager.

Dr. Ashenback glanced at the clock on the wall, performed a complicated mental computation, and said, "I suppose I've time for one more. Count me in."

"Please continue," Mr. Towne told Mr. Trevalyn.

"Now I come to my doubtful premise," said Mr. Trevalyn.

The businessmen were disappointed: having already conceded much without argument.

"Let us assume," said Mr. Trevalyn, "that energy could be destroyed. That it's within the limits of feasibility."

"Preposterous," said Dr. Ashenback.

"Oh, this I admit. But grant it for the sake of argument."

This did not go down well, so Mr. Trevalyn continued quickly:

"Good. Now, we've agreed that if a thing could be done, somewhere, somehow, intelligent life would do it. This means if it were possible to destroy energy, someone would already have done so. Somewhere in the universe, someone would have destroyed a little particle or wave or whatever of energy at some time: would have taken all the energy out of some particle at one time."

Dr. Ashenback ordered another drink. The three businessmen waited his response.

"If," Dr. Ashenback said, "you froze a particle of matter to absolute zero—stopped it dead in its tracks, so to speak—the particle would still have the energy of the earth spinning around the sun—of the sun around the galaxy—of the galaxy around the nebula—or is that vice versa?—of the nebula

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around the . . . You see my point. Only something outside of the space-time continuum could actually remove all energy from a particle. It would require something with a fixed reference point."

In exasperation, Mr. Travelyn drained his glass and banged it down impatiently. "You're not playing the game," he said accusingly. "You've promised to grant me a premise."

"But it's preposterous," said Dr. Ashenback.

"I'm not sure," said Mr. Cowles, "that we should accept a preposterous premise. It makes it too easy. You could, for example, take as a premise that if there were intelligent life, it would broadcast radio waves to all other planets . . ."

"Very well," said Mr. Trevalyn. "I shall not go on."

"No, that's not fair," said Mr. Towne. "We should hear him out."

"It's preposterous," said Dr. Ashenback.

"Well, let's hear him out," said Mr. Earles. "We've got to play the game. Please, now, go on with it, sir."

"I don't see that you've proved anything, anyway," said Mr. Cowles.

"Wait until I get my drink," said Mr. Trevalyn.

The Professor settled back comfortably and lit his pipe. He smiled pleasantly, waiting.

The clock went tick-tock, tick-tock. There was the sound of ice in a glass.

"Very well," said Mr. Trevalyn at last, after verifying the new mixture by taking a generous sample. "We're all familiar with Dr. Einstein's equation, his beautiful equation, $E = Mc^2$. From this simple statement, for example, we can calculate the energy of a hydrogen bomb. But that's not all. It indicates an even more powerful force—the most destructive force in the universe—a force strong enough to puncture—as the Professor puts it so aptly—our 'space-time continuum,' as a little boy might puncture a balloon, a toy balloon."

"Oh, come now," said Mr. Earles.

"Here," said Mr. Trevalyn, before the opposition could rally against him. He drew forth a pen and wrote on the cocktail napkin before him:

$$E = Mc^2$$

or

$$c^2 = \frac{E}{M}$$

"Now," he said. "Let E equal zero. Thus:"

$$c^2 = \frac{0}{M}$$

or

$$c^2 = 0$$

and

$$c = 0$$

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"Now, this tells us that the speed of light is zero. This is illogical on the face of it, is it not? Because we know that the speed of light is a fixed constant, a velocity of approximately 186,000 miles per second. . . . But are we, really, confronting a paradox? Now we see the beauty of the equation: how it ties together space and time into the same continuum and shows the inter-relationship of both. . . . So, at the moment that one bit of intelligent life destroyed that one infinitesimal bit of energy, the speed of light would have become zero: *time, gentlemen, would have ceased to exist!* With time ceasing to exist, space would cease to exist. Destroying a single particle of energy would puncture a hole in the very fabric of the universe itself and it would vanish quite away."

There was a lengthy silence, while each went over the logic of the reasoning for himself. Lips moved but no refutation came.

The ornamental clock, in the silence, said, "Tick-tock."

Let E equal zero, then the speed of light must be zero, and if the speed of light is zero, then there can be no time, because light travels at 186,000 miles per second. They silently knit up the universe in a little ball of space and time, each dependent on the other for the pattern: each, alone, non-existent. A fabric of stars and galaxies and planets and people made up by the interaction of two nothingnesses.

The clock went, "Tick-tock."

"Really," said Mr. Earles at last, rather in awe.

"By God, he's *right,*" said Mr. Towne.

Mr. Trevalyn sat back. "So if it could have been done, it would have been done, and we would not be here talking as we are: there would be no universe at all. What do you say, Professor?"

But Dr. Ashenback had risen and was hurrying out the door.

"Hey! My drink!" called Mr. Trevalyn, but the Professor was gone.

"Queer chap," he said. "Well. So, you see, it could be proved logically, granting the questionable premise . . ."

"The preposterous premise," said Mr. Cowles for reassurance.

"Well, in any event, I'm glad it's not true," said Mr. Towne. "Think how lonely it would be to know that nowhere in the universe is there any intelligent life but us: just mankind, the four of us, Charley, and the rest, twirling along on this little planet: to die and be forgotten. I couldn't look at the stars and the night, thinking there was nothing else out there. You know, I really don't think I could stand it, knowing this whole big machine, inconceivably vast, had no friends in it anywhere."

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"I think he's won the bet," said Mr. Earles. "And I think the Professor owes you a drink, too." He called Charley over. "The Professor ran out on a bet," he said. "We should charge this gentleman's drink to his account."

"He hasn't opened one yet."

"That's all right," Mr. Trevalyn said. "I've got more than I can drink already. Queer chap, though. He didn't even finish his last one."

"He probably overstayed," Charley said. "He was running an experiment tonight and he wanted to get back for the results."

"What's he do out there?" Mr. Cowles asked.

"Oh," said Charley, "he's messing around with anti-gravity. He doodled all over a napkin last night trying to explain it to me. It's too deep for me. He's set up a magnetic field of some sort or something, and he's squeezing down mass. He said tonight the mass was going to disappear entirely, and he'd—"

"What?" said Mr. Trevalyn.

"Something about this machine that destroys mass," Charley clarified.

"I see," said Mr. Trevalyn.

After a moment of silence, Mr. Earles cleared his throat.

Tick-tock, went the ornamental clock.

"I suspect," said Mr. Earles, "that we had better have those drinks now."

They all sat before nearly full glasses. Ritualistically they drank deep.

"No hurry, gentlemen," said Charley. "There's still two hours until closing time."

Automatically all eyes went to the wall.

Mr. Cowles broke the breath-held silence.

"Let us fervently hope so," he said.

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As a mouse knows about cheese and traps but does not really know about Man, is it possible that Man knows about, for example, magnetic fields, but knows nothing about the Superior beings of whose existence those fields may be an evidence?

NIGHT PIECE

by Poul Anderson

HE HAD NOT GONE FAR FROM the laboratory when he heard the footsteps. Even then he could sense they were not human, but he stopped and turned about with a fluttering hope that they might be after all.

It was late on Wednesday night. His assistants had quit at five, leaving him to phone his wife that she had better not wait up, then fry some hash over a Bunsen burner and return to the instrument that was beginning to function. He had often done so, and afterward walked the mile to a bus stop where he could get a ride directly home. His wife worried about him, but he told her this was a peaceful industrial section, himself nearly the last living man after dark, in no danger of robbery or murder. The walk relaxed him, filled his lungs with cool air and cleared his brain of potential dreams.

Tonight, when the symptoms began, sheer habit had made him lock the door and start out afoot. The steps behind made him wonder if he should have called a taxi. Not that wheels could outpace the thing, but there might have been some comfort in the driver's stolid presence. *To be sure,* he thought, *if it is a holdup man—*

The hope died as he looked backward. The sidewalk stretched gray and hard and lifeless, under widely spaced lamps: first a gaunt pole, a globe of glare on top, a dingy yellow puddle of light below; then a thickening murkiness, becoming night itself, until the next globe stood forth, scattering sickly-colored illumination into emptiness. The street ran black of hue, like a river which moved in some secret fashion. Along the other edge of the sidewalk rose brick walls, where an occasional

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doorway or window made a blocked-off hole. Everything went in straight lines that converged toward an infinity hidden by the dark.

All the pavement was quite bare. A thin breeze sent a scrap of paper tumbling and clicking past his feet. Otherwise he heard nothing, not even the follower.

He tried to slow his heartbeat. *It can't hurt me,* he told himself, knowing he lied. For a while he stood immobile, not so much unwilling to turn his back on the footsteps (for they could be anywhere; more accurately, they were nowhere) as unwilling to hear them again.

"But I can't stay here all night," he said. The whisper made a relieving counterpoint to his pulse. He felt sweat run from his armpits and down his ribs, tickling. "It'll only take a different form. I'd better get home, at least."

He had not known he possessed enough courage to resume walking.

The footsteps picked up. They weren't loud, which was just as well, for they seemed less human each second he listened. There was a slithering quality to them: not wet but dry, a scaly dryness that went sliding over dirty concrete. He didn't even know how many feet there were. More than two, surely. Perhaps so many that they weren't feet at all, but one supple length. And the head rose, weaving about in curves that rippled and rustled—becoming less sinuous as the hood swelled until the sidewise figure eight upon it stood forth plain; a thin little tongue flickered as if frantic, but there was an immortal patience in the eyes, which were lidless.

"Of course this is ridiculous," he told himself. "Giving pictorial form to that which is, by definition, beyond any form whatsoever —" His voice came out small. The rustling stopped. For a moment he heard only the clack of his own shoes and the millrace blood in his body. He hoped, crazily through all the gibberish in his head.

Faustus is the name, good sir, not Frankenstein but Faustus in the Faustian sense if you please and means fortunate in the Latin but one may wonder if the Latin was not constructed with a hitherto unsuspected sense of irony, e.g. my wife awaits me, she may not have gone to bed yet and lamplight would fall on her hair but my shoes are too tight and too loud.

That it might have abandoned him. Or rather, the scientific brain cells corrected, that he had somehow slipped back from the state of awareness of these things. *Because,* he thought, *I deny that rationality is dead in the cosmos, and even that my experiments with the ESP amplifier opened hell gate. Rather, they sensitized*

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me to an unsuspected class of phenomena, one for which human evolution has not prepared me because humankind never encountered it before. (Except, perhaps, in the thinnest and swiftest accidental glimpses, revelation, nightmare, and madness.) I am the early student of X-rays, the alchemist heating liquid mercury, the half ape burned by fire, the mouse strayed onto a battlefield. I shall be destroyed if I cannot escape, but the universe will still live, her and me and them and a certain willow on a hilltop which fills with sunset light each summer evening. I pray that this be true.

Then the scales uncoiled and went scrabbling toward him, louder now, and he caught a hot cedary odor. But the night breeze was cold in his hair. He cried out, once, and began to run.

The street lamps reached ahead of him, on to an unseen infinity, like stars in space. No, lonelier than that. Each lamp was an island universe, spinning up there a million years from the next neighbor. Surely, in all that darkness, a man might find some hiding place! He was out of condition. Soon he was breathing through a wide-open, dried-out mouth. His lungs were twin fires and he felt his eyeballs bulge from pressure. His shoes grew so heavy that he thought he ran with two planets on his feet.

Through thunder and breakings he heard the rustle, closer still, and his shoes going slap-slap-slap on bare pavement, under the purulent street lamps. Up ahead were two of them, whose globes looked close together from where he was, and the shadows they cast made a dark shaft between that reached straight upward to an infinity from which stars fountained in horrible fire. He had not imagined there could be so grim a sight. He had no breath left, but his brain screamed for him.

Somewhere there must be darkness. A tunnel to hide in, to close off and seal. There must be warmth and the sound of waters. And darkness again. If he was caught, let it at least not happen in the light. But he begged the tunnel would hide him.

The current up which he waded was strong. It slid heavily and sensuously about him, pushing on breast and belly, loins and thighs. He was totally blind now, but that was good, he was far from the world-spewing globes. The water's noise echoed from the tunnel walls, ringing and booming. Now and then a wave splashed against them, a loud clear sound followed by a thin shower of drops, like laughter. His feet slipped, he flailed about with his arms, touched the warm curved odorous wall of the tunnel and shoved himself back upright. He had a

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sense of wading uphill, and the current strengthened with each step he achieved. *A hyperbola,* he thought in upsurging weariness. *I'll never reach the end. That's at infinity.*

After centuries he heard the pumps that drove the waters, pumps as big as the world, throbbing in the dark. He stopped, afraid to go one, afraid the rotors would seize him and grind him and squirt him from a cylinder.

But when the hooded swimmer struck him and he went under, he must shriek.

Too late now! The waters took him, stopped his voice, cataracted down his throat and churned in his guts. A momentary gulp of air smelled like cedar. The swimmer closed its jaws. He heard his skin tear under the fangs, and the poisons began to tingle down the skein of his nerves. The head marked with a sideways figure eight shook him as a dog shakes a rat. Nevertheless he planted feet on the tunnel floor, gripped the monstrous barrel of a body, and threw his last energies against it. Back and forth they swayed, the tunnel trembled under their violence, they smashed into its walls. The pumps began to skip beats, the walls began to crack and dissolve, the waters rushed forth across the world. But still he was gripped.

He shook off the hand, leaned his face against blessed scratchy brick and tried to vomit. But nothing happened. The policeman took him by the arm again, but more gently. "What's the matter?"

A lamp near the alley mouth dribbled in just enough light to show the large blue shape with the star on the breast. "What's wrong?" insisted the policeman. "I thought you was drunk, but you don't smell like it. Sick?"

"Yes." He controlled himself, suppressed the last belly spasm and turned around to face the policeman. The other voice came faintly to him, with a curious heterodyned whine, a rise and fall like speech heard through high fever. "End of the world, you know."

"Huh?"

For a moment he considered asking the policeman's help. The fellow looked so substantial and blue. His big jowly face was not unkind. But of course the policeman could not help. *He can take me home, if I so request. Or put me in jail, if I act oddly enough. Or call a doctor if I fall boneless at his feet. But what's the use? There is no cure for being in an ocean.*

He glanced at his watch. Only a few minutes had passed since he left the laboratory. At that time he had wanted companionship, a human face to look at if not to take along on his flight. Now he had his wish, and there was no com-

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fort. The policeman was as remote as the lamp. A part of him could talk to the policeman, just as another part could direct heart and lungs and glands in their work. But the essential *I* had departed this world. The I was not even human any longer. No man could help him find his way back.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I get a bit stupid." His reasoning faculties worked very fast. "During these attacks, I mean."

"What attacks?"

"Diabetes. You know, diabetics get fainting spells. I didn't quite pass out this time, but I got rather woozy. I'll be okay, though."

"Oh." The policeman's ignorance of medicine proved as great as hoped. "I see. Want I should call you a cab?"

"No thanks, Officer. Not necessary. I'm on my way to the bus stop. Honest, I'll be fine."

"Well, I better come along with you," said the policeman.

They walked side by side, unspeaking. Presently they emerged on an avenue that had restaurants and theaters as well as darkened shops. Light glittered, blinked, quivered in red and yellow and cold blue, cars went slithering past, men and somewhat fewer women drifted along the sidewalks. The air was full of noise, feet, tires, think it'll rain tomorrow close the deal for paper, mister? A neon sign across from the bus stop made *Idle Hour* Bar & Grill, blink, *Idle Hour* blink *Idle Hour* blink *Idle Hour* blink.

"Here you are," said the policeman. "You sure you'll be okay?"

"Quite sure. Thank you, Officer." To please the policeman and make him go away, he sat down on the bench.

"Well, good luck to you." The big blue man walked off and was lost in the drift.

A woman sat at the other end of the bench. In a tired and middle-aged fashion she looked a little bit like his sister. He noticed her casting glances in his direction and wondered why. Probably curious to know the reason he came here escorted, but afraid to ask lest he think she was trying to get picked up. It didn't matter. She was hollow anyway. They all were, himself included. They were infinitesimal skins of distorted space enclosing nothing whatever, not even space. The lights were hollow and the noise was hollow. All fullness was ocean.

He felt much at peace. Now that he was no longer pursued . . . well, why should he be? It had happened to completion. And then after the tunnel broke, the waters had covered everything. They reached vast and gray, warm and still, with a faint taste of salt like tears. In the translucent greenish gray where he lay, easily rocking, there was no place for pursuit, for anything except everything.

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Time flowed in the ocean, but a slow soft kind of time. First the light strengthened, sourceless, eventually revealing the eternal overcast, which was cool nacre. Sometimes a lower stratum would form, mare's tails whipped on a sharp wind or blue-black masses rearing up with lightning in their heads. But when that happened, he could sink undersurface, where the water was forever still and greenish. . . . Finally the light faded. The nights were altogether dark. He liked them best, for then he could lie and feel the tides pass through him. A tide was more than a rolling of his body; it was a deep secret thrill, somehow each atom of him was touched by the force as it passed and a tingle scarcely sensed would go down all molecular lengths. By day he enjoyed the tides too, but not so much, for then other life forms were about. He had only the dimmest awareness of these, but they did pass by, sometimes brushing him or considering him with patient lidless eyes.

"Excuse me, sir, do you know if this bus goes to Seventh Street?"

It startled him a little that his body should start. Surely there was no sense to the chilly prickles of sweat that burst out all over him. "No," he said. His voice came out so harsh that the woman edged even further away. Somehow that was an additional flick across his soft skin. He twisted, trying to escape; he grew plates of bone so that they must leave him in peace.

"No," he said, "I don't believe it does. I get off before then myself—I've never ridden as far as Seventh Street—so I'm not sure. But I don't believe it does."

His logical faculty grew furious with him for talking so idiotically. "Oh," she said. "Thank you." He said, "You can ask the driver." She said, "Yes, I suppose I can. Thank you." He said, "You're welcome." She obviously wanted to break off the misbegotten conversation and didn't quite see how. For his part, he couldn't take any more. The noises and skins were hollow, no doubt, but they kept striking at him. He jumped up and crossed the street. Her eyes pursued him. He hadn't seen her blink.

The *Idle Hour* was dim. A couple sat in a booth along one wall; a discouraged man hunched at the bar opposite; a juke box made garish embers but remained mercifully unfed. The bartender was a thin man in the usual white shirt and black bow tie. He was washing some glasses and said without enthusiasm, "Be closing time pretty soon, mister."

"That's all right. Scotch and soda." Speech was automatic, like breath. When he had the glass, he retired to a booth of his own. He leaned back on faded plastic cushioning, set the glass before

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him and stared at the ice cubes. He didn't want to drink.

Who would want to drink in the ocean? he thought with a touch of wryness.

But this is wrong!

He didn't want to make jokes, he wanted the tides and the plankton swirling into his mouth, the thin warm saltiness, the good sound of rainstorms lashing the surface when he was snugly down among seaweeds. *They* were cool and silken, they caressed. He changed the awkward bony plates that protected him from the others for scales, which were not quite as strong but left him slippery and flexible and alive to the stroking, streaming green weed. Now he could slip through their most secret grottos, nose about on the oozy bottom and look with incurious lidless eyes at the fossils he uncovered.

"Let's examine the superman thesis," he said to his wife. "I don't mean the Nietzschean Ubermensch. I mean Superior, the nonhuman animal with nonhuman powers making him as much stronger than us as we are stronger than the apes. Traditionally, he's supposed to born of man and woman. In hard biological fact, we know this isn't possible. Even if the simultaneous alteration of millions of genes could take place, the resulting embryo would be so alien in blood type, enzyme system, the very proteins, that it would hardly be created before the outraged uterus destroyed it."

"Perhaps in a million years, man could evolve into superman," she answered.

"Perhaps," he said skeptically. "I'm inclined to doubt it, though. The great apes, even the monkeys, aren't likely to evolve into men. They branched off from our common ancestor too long ago; they've followed their special path too far. Likewise, men may improve their reasoning, visualizing, imagining ability—what we're pleased to call their conscious intelligence—their own characteristic as a species—they may improve that through a megayear or so of slow evolution. But they'd still be men, wouldn't they? A later model, but still men.

"Now the truly superior being . . ." He held his wine glass up to the light. "Let's speculate aloud. What is superiority anyhow, in a biological sense? Isn't it an ability—a mode of behavior, I'll say—that enables the species to cope more effectively with environment?

"Okay. So let's inquire what modes of behavior there are. The simplest, practiced by unicellular organisms as well as higher ones like sunflowers, is tropism. A mere chemical response to a fixed set of stimuli. More complicated and adaptable are sets of reflexes. That's the characteristic insectal

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mode. Then you get true instincts: inherited behavior patterns, but generalized, flexible and modifiable. Finally, in the higher mammals, you get a degree of conscious intelligence. Man, of course, has made this his particular strength. He also has quite a bit of instinct, some reflexes, and maybe a few tropisms. His ability to reason, though, is what's gotten him as far as he's come on this planet.

"To surpass us, should Superior try to outhuman humanity? Shouldn't he rather possess only a modicum of reasoning ability by our standards, very week instincts, a few reflexes, and no tropisms? But his specialty, his characteristic mode, would be something we can't imagine. We may have a bare touch of it, as the apes and dogs have a touch of logical reasoning power. But we can no more imagine its full development than a dog could follow Einstein's equations."

"What might this ability be?" his wife wondered.

He shrugged. "Who knows? Conceivably in the ESP field—Now I'm letting my hobby horse run away with me again. (Damn it, though, I *am* starting to get reproducible results!) Whatever it is, it's something much more powerful than logic or imagination. And as futile for us to speculate about as for the dog to ponder Einstein."

"Do you really believe there are such superbeings?" She had come to expect almost any hypothesis of him.

"Oh, no," he laughed. "I'm just playing a game with ideas. Like your kitten with a ball of string. But assuming Superior does exist . . . hm. Do mice know that men exist? All a mouse knows is that the world contains good things like houses and cheese, bad things like weatherstripping and traps, without any orderly pattern that his instincts could adapt him to. He sees men, sure, but how can he know they're a different order of life, responsible for all the strangeness in his world? In the same way, we may have coexisted with Superior for a million years, and never known it. The part of him we can detect may be an accepted feature of our universe, like the earth's magnetic field; or an unexplained feature like occasional lights in the sky; or he may be quite undetectable. His activities would never impinge on ours, except once in a while by sheerest accident—and then another 'miracle' is recorded that science never does find an explanation for."

She smiled, enjoying his own pleasure. "Where do these beings come from? Another planet?"

"I doubt that. They probably evolved here right along with us. All life on earth has an equally ancient lineage. I've no idea what

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the common ancestor of man and Superior could have been. Perhaps as recent as some half ape in the Pliocene, perhaps as far back as some amphibian in the Carboniferous. 'We took one path, they took another, and never the twain shall meet."

"I hope not. We'd have no more chance than the mice, would we?"

"I don't know. But we'd certainly best cultivate our own garden."

Which, however, he had not done. He wasn't sure how he had blundered onto the Superior plane of existence: or, rather, how his mind or his rudimentary ESP or whatever-it-was had suddenly begun reacting to the behavior-mode of that race. He only knew, with the flat sureness of immediate experience, that it had happened.

His logical mind, unaffected as yet, searched in a distant and dreamy fashion for a rationale. The amplifier alone could hardly be responsible. But maybe the remembrance of his speculative fable had provided the additional impetus necessary? If that were so, then his fate was a most improbable accident. Other men could still go ahead and study ESP phenomena as much as they cared to, learn a lot, use their knowledge, all in perfect safety, with never a hint that on a higher level of those phenomena Superior carried out huge purposes.

Himself, though, was sunk in a gray ocean on a gray world. Let him so remain. Never had he imagined such peace, or the tides or the kissing seaweeds; and as for the lightning storms, he could hide when they flashed. Down he went then, into a green well of silence whose roof coruscated with light shards; further down, the well darkened, the light shrank to spot overhead (if that meant anything here where there was no weight, no heaviness, no force or current or pursuit) and then the dark enfolded him. On the bottom it was always night.

He lay in the ooze, which was cool though the water stayed warm, he wrapped the dear darkness around him like another skin, closed the lids he had grown to keep daylight off, he could taste salt and feel the tides go through his molecules. High above rolled the clouds, thunder banged from horizon to horizon, the sky was all one blaze of great lightnings; wind yammered, driving spindrift flat off the crests of the waves, which foamed and snarled and shivered the bones of the world. Even down in the depths—

No! What a storm that must be! Fear tinged him. He didn't want to remember lightnings, which forked their length across heaven and sizzled like hastening scales. He burrowed into the mud until he touched bedrock and, and, and felt it quiver.

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Even the storm could not be as dreadful as that deep earthquake vibration. He wailed voicelessly and fled back upward. The others swarmed around him, driven from their grottos by the growing violence. Teeth snapped at him, lidless eyes glowed like twinned globes. Some had been torn apart; he tasted blood in the waters.

Another crash and another went through him, as deeply as ever the tides had done, but bruising and ripping. He burst the surface. Rain and scud whipped him. Wallowing on the wrinkled back of a wave, he looked straight up at the lightning. Thunder filled his skull.

A deeper noise responded. Across many wild miles he saw the mountain rise from the waters. Black and enormous it was lifted; water cascaded off its flanks, fire and sulfur boiled from its throat. Shock followed shock, flinging him to and fro, over and under. He felt, rather than saw, the whole sea bottom lifting beneath him.

He gibbered in the foam and fled, seeking depths, seeking a place where he could not see the mountain. Its pinnacle had already gone through the clouds. In that wounded sky the stars blazed gruesomely.

Somewhere through the explosions, he thought he must be able to get free. Surely all the ocean was not convulsed. But a basalt peak smote him from beneath. The water squirted from his gills; he went sick and dizzy. Raised into naked air, he felt the delicate gill membranes shrivel and drew a breath that burned him down throat and lungs to his inmost cell. The black reef continued rising. Soon it would be part of the mountainside. He made one sprawling flop, all his strength expended: slid off the rock, back down into the sea. But a wave grabbed him in its white teeth and shook him.

He pushed the hand from his shoulder. "All right, all right, all right," he mumbled. "Let me alone."

"Closing time, I told you," said the bartender. "You deaf or something? I gotta close this place."

"Let me alone." He covered his ears against the screaming.

"Don't make me call a cop. Go on home, mister. You look like you could stand a night's rest." The bartender was thin but expert. He applied leverage in the right places, got his customer to his feet and shambling across the floor. "You just go on home now. Good night. Closing time, you know."

The door swung shut, as if to deny the bartender's existence. Other hollow people were on the street, some going for coffee, some entering the bus that waited on the opposite curb.

My bus, he thought. *The one*

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that may or may not go as far as Seventh Street. The thought was unreal. All thought was. Reality consisted in a black mountain, rising and rising, himself trapped in a pool on the slope where the surf had cast him, gasping raw air, scourged by rain, deafened by wind and thunder, and lifted toward the terrible stars.

He crouched in his wretchedness, implored the ocean to come back, but at the same time he hissed to the fire and the wind and the sulfurous reek, *If you won't let me go, I'll destroy you. See if I don't!*

Habit had taken him over the street to the bus. He stopped in front of the doors. What was he doing here? The thing was an iron box. No, he must not enter the box. The hollow people sat there in rows, waiting for him. He must tear down the mountain instead.

What mountain?

He knew in the thinking part of himself that somewhere in space and time was an existence not all harm and hatred. The night was too loud now, beneath winter stars, for him to return thither. He must pull down the mountain, so he could regain the ocean. . . . But his logical faculties spun free, down and down a hyperbolic path. They considered the abstract unreal proposition that he would not be hollow if he could become human again. And then he would be happy, though at present he didn't want to be human, he wanted to rip the mountain and re-enter the sea. But as a logical exercise, to pass the time for the unused part of his brain, *why* had he suffered and fought and been hunted, since that moment when he was first sensitized to . . . to Superior's mode of behavior?

He could no more understand the situation with reason than a dog could use instinct to puzzle out the machinery of this bus and the why of its existence. (No, he would not enter that box. He didn't know why, except that the box was hollow and waited for him. But he was sure it went to Seventh Street.) Nonetheless, reason was not absolutely useless. The activities of Superior were always and forever incomprehensible to him, but he could describe their general tendency. Violence, cruelty, destruction. Which didn't make sense! No species could survive that used its powers only for such ends.

Therefore, Superior did not. Most of the time, he/she/it/? was just being Superior, and as such was completely beyond human perception. Occasionally, though, there was conflict. By analogy, mankind—all animals—behaved constructively on the whole, but sometimes engaged in strife. Superior? Well, of course Superior didn't have wars in the

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human sense of the word. No use speculating what they did have. Conflicts of some kind, anyhow, where an issue was decided not by reason or compromise but by force. And the force employed was (to give it a name) of an ESP nature.

A mouse could not understand human art or science. In a way, he couldn't even see them. But a mouse could be affected by the crudest, most animal-like manifestation of human behavior: physical combat. A mathematical theorem did not exist for the mouse; a bullet did.

By analogy again, he, the human, was a mouse that had wandered onto a battlefield. By some accident, he had been sensitized to the lowest mode of Superior behavior and was thereby being affected; he was caught in the opposing tides of a death struggle.

Not that he was directly experiencing what Superior actually performed. Everything that had happened was merely the way the forces, the currents, felt to him. Frantically seeking a balance, his mind interpreted those unnatural stimuli in the nearest available human terms.

He thought his sensations must dimly reflect the course of the battle. One side or entity or . . . Aleph . . . had gotten the upper hand and in some sense pursued the other till it found a momentary shelter. Zayin had then had a breathing space until Aleph found it again, pursued it again. Cornered, Zayin fought back so fiercely that Aleph must in turn retreat. Now, having recovered during the lull that followed, Zayin was renewing the battle. . . . But none of this made any difference. The doings of Superior were, in themselves, irrelevant to Sapiens. He was the mouse on the battlefield, nothing else.

With luck, a mouse could escape from bursting shells and burning tracers before they smashed him. A man could escape from this other conflict before it burned out his mind: by desensitizing himself, by ceasing to perceive the transcendent energies around him, much as one could get relief from too brilliant a light by closing one's eyes. But what was the method of desensitization?

Clouds broke further, and he saw the moon flying pocked among the stars. Its light was as cold as the wind. His flesh quivered in the pain of cold and earthquake shocks. But the ocean tumbled not far off, white under the moon. He felt that impact reverberate in the mountain. He began to crawl from his dwindling pool.

How can I get away?

"Hey, mister, you gonna board this bus or not?"

The currents carried me first in one direction, then in another.

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Down to the sea depths, up to the stars. Whether I go forward or backward, seaward or skyward, I am still within the currents.

"I said, you comin' aboard? Don't just stand there blocking the door."

Lightning burned his eyes. He felt the thunder in his bones. But louder, now, was the hate in him: for the mountain which had ruined his sea and for the sea which had cast him onto the mountain. *I will destroy them all.*

And then fear smote him, for through the noise and the gigantic white flashes he heard himself asking: "Do you go to Seventh Street?"

The driver said across light-years, "Yeah, that's the end of my run. Come on, hop in. I got a schedule to keep."

"No—" he whimpered, stumbling backward toward the ocean. His teeth clattered with cold. The waves retreated from him. *I am not going in a box to Seventh Street!*

"Where do you wanna go, then?" asked the driver, elaborately sarcastic.

"Go?" he repeated in a numb voice. "Why . . . home."

Please, he called to the surf. But still the tide withdrew, a monstrous hollow rumble. He turned about, hissing at the mountain where it flamed overhead. *All right, then,* said his hatred. He started to crawl up the wet black rocks. *All right, if you won't tell me the way home, I'll climb up over your peak.*

But you do know the way home, said his human logical faculty.

What? He stopped. The wind hooted and whipped him. If he didn't keep moving he would freeze.

Of course. Consider the pattern. Forward or backward, you are still moving within the currents. But if you remain still—

No! he screamed, and in his fear he reared up and clawed at the stars for support.

It won't take long.

Oh, God, no, I'm too afraid. No man should have to do this twice.

The cold and lightning and earthquake struck at him. He cowered on the beach, under the mountain, too frightened to hate. *No, I must climb. I can't stay here.*

The bus driver snorted and closed the door in his face.

Where the courage came from, he never knew. For an instant he was able to remember his wife's eyes, and that she was waiting for him. He raised his hand and rapped on the door. The driver groaned.

If he goes off and leaves me—if he delays half a minute letting me in—I'll never go aboard. I won't be able to.

The door folded back.

He gathered the last rags of

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himself around himself, climbed up the step and over the threshold.

Something snatched at him. The wind drove in between his ribs, lightning hit him, he had never conceived such pain. He opened his mouth to yell.

No! That's part of the pattern. Don't do it.

Somehow he maintained silence, clung to the stanchion as the bus got under way and felt the galaxies sundered. The earthshaken rocks on the mountainside rolled beneath him, thrusting him upward. He planted his feet on the ground and said: "To Seventh Street."

The world drained out of him.

As blackness faded again, he found himself sprawled on one of the longitudinal seats up front. "Now look, buster," said the driver, "drunk or not, you pay the fare, see? I don't want no trouble. Just gimme the fare."

He drew a breath deep into starved lungs. The bus was noisy, with a stench from the motor; tired people sagged down its length, under improbably bright-colored advertisements. On either side he could see the lighted windows of houses.

How still the night was!

"What is the fare?" he asked. *Ridiculous,* his logical mind scolded him, wearily but not very angrily. After all, the rest of him had shown up well too, when the crisis came. *I've ridden this line a hundred times. But I can't quite remember the cost. It feels so new to be human.*

"Two bits."

"Oh, is that all? I'd have paid more." His knees were weak, but he managed to stand up and fish out a quarter. It clinked in the coin box with a noise whose metal clarity he savored.

Perhaps a little sympathetic, or perhaps from a sense of duty, the driver asked him, "D'you say you was going to Seventh Street?"

"No." He sat down again. "Not tonight, after all. My home isn't quite that far."

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The Good Doctor this month offers a report on the composition of our planet, with a note on the Mohole operation and a regrettable suggestion for a ship's name.

RECIPE FOR A PLANET

by Isaac Asimov

SLOWLY, AMERICAN SCIENTISTS (and, I believe, Soviet scientists, independently) are making ready to drill a hole through the earth's crust to reach the layer beneath. This projected "Mohole" (and I'll explain the name, for those of you who happen not to know, later on) will, if it succeeds, bring us the first direct information concerning any portion of our planet other than the very rind. This is exciting for several reasons, one of which is that it will lower the high-blood pressure of many a geologist who for years has had to watch man make ready to go millions of miles out in space while totally unable to penetrate more than a few miles below earth's outer surface. And there is something annoying (if you're a geologist) in the thought that mankind will certainly feel, in its own corporeal hands, a sample of the surface of Mars, long before it can possibly feel a sample from the central regions of our own planet.

And yet we ought to look at the bright side. The wonder is not that we are so helpless in the face of some thousands of miles of rigid impenetrability. Naturally, we're helpless. The wonder is that, being so helpless, we have nevertheless deduced as much information about the interior of the earth as we have.

Of course, there are parts of the earth that we can see and feel and which we can subject to our various

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instruments. Once modern chemistry was established by Lavoisier, there was no serious trouble in analyzing the composition of the atmosphere and of the oceans (hydrosphere). The former is, essentially, a mixture of oxygen, nitrogen and argon gases in the ratio, roughly, of 78 : 21 : 1. The latter is, essentially, a 3 percent water solution of sodium chloride, with some added impurities.

In addition, the outermost portions of the solid matter forming the body of the planet (lithosphere) is within reach. This, however, presents a new problem. Atmosphere and hydrosphere are homogeneous; that is, if you analyze any small portion of it, you have the composition of the whole. The solid earth itself is heterogeneous; one portion is not necessarily at all like another, which is why we have diamonds in Kimberley and gold in the Klondike but nothing but cheap dirt and crabgrass in my backyard.

This means that in order to find out the overall composition of the soil and rocks, analyses have to be run on different samples from different areas of the world, and some sort of average must be taken after estimating that there is so much of this kind of rock on earth and so much of that. Various geologists have done this and come up with estimates that agree fairly well.

A typical such estimate is presented here, with the major elements of the earth's crust presented in order of percentage by weight:

oxygen	46.60
silicon	27.72
aluminum	8.13
iron	5.00
calcium	3.63
sodium	2.83
potassium	2.59
magnesium	2.09

The eight elements make up just over 98½ percent of the weight of the earth's outermost layer. The remaining ninety-odd elements can be considered as trace impurities (very important ones in some cases, to be sure, since included among them are elements such as carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and phosphorus, which are essential to life).

The elements in the list don't usually occur free; all are found in combination—with each other, naturally, since there is little else to combine with. The most obvious combination is that between silicon and oxygen (which together make up three-fourths of the weight of earth's outermost layer) to form silicon dioxide or silica. Quartz is an example of relatively pure silica, while flint is less pure. Sand is weathered silica. In combination with the other six elements listed (all metals), silicon and oxygen form silicates.

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In brief, then, the solid earth's reachable portion can be looked on as a mixture of silica and silicates, with all else chicken-feed, at least in terms of quantity.

The distribution of elements in the earth's crust seems lopsided, but, as it happens, when we calculate that distribution by weight, as in the above list, we are making it as un-lopsided as possible. For instance, suppose we estimated the composition by numbers of atoms instead of by weight.

Well, of the eight major elements of the earth's crust, oxygen happens to have the lightest atom. That means that a fixed weight of oxygen will contain 1.75 times as many atoms as that same weight of silicon; 2.5 times as many as the same weight of potassium; 3.5 times as many as the same weight of iron.

If you count by atom, then, it turns out that of every 100 atoms in the earth's crust, 62.5 are oxygen. To put it another way, pick up a handful of soil and chances are that five out of eight of the atoms you are holding are oxygen.

But matters are even more lopsided than that. In forming compounds with silicon and with the six major metals, the oxygen atom accepts electrons; the others all donate them. When an atom accepts electrons, those additional electrons take up orbits (to use the term loosely) on the very outskirts of the atom, swooping far out from the nucleus, which holds them rather loosely. Since the radius of an anion (*i.e.* an atom plus one or more electrons in excess) extends out to the farthest electronic orbit, the oxygen anion is larger than the oxygen atom proper.

On the other hand, an element that gives up an electron or two, gives up just those outermost ones that are most weakly held. The remaining electrons cluster relatively closely about the nucleus and the radius of such a cation (*i.e.* an atom with a deficiency of one or more electrons) is smaller than that of the original atom.

The result is that the oxygen anion has a radius of 1.40 Angstrom units (an Angstrom unit is a hundred-millionth of a centimeter) while the silicon cation has a radius of 0.42 Angstrom units and the iron cation has one of 0.74 Angstrom units. This despite the fact that the silicon and iron cations are each considerably more massive than the relatively light oxygen anion.

The volume of any sphere varies as the cube of the radius so that the discrepancy in radii among the ions becomes much magnified in the volume itself. For instance, the volume of the oxygen anion is about 11.5 cubic Angstrom units, while the volume of the iron cation is only 2.1 cubic Angstrom units and the volume of

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the silicon cation is only 0.4 cubic Angstrom units.

Allowing for the greater number of oxygen atoms and the greater volume of the individual oxygen anion, it turns out that no less than 93.77 percent of the *volume* of the earth's crust is taken up by oxygen. The solid earth on which we walk is a well-packed set of oxygen anions, crowded closely together, with the small cations of the other seven elements tucked in here and there in the interstices.

That goes for the Rock of Gibraltar, too—just a heap of oxygen and little more.

All this data deals, of course, with those portions of the lithosphere which we can gouge out and pulverize and put through the analytic mill. What about those portions we can't test? Mankind has dug some three miles deep into the crust in pursuit of gold and a couple of miles deeper in chase of oil, but these are highly localized pinpricks. All but the surface is beyond our ken and may even be forever beyond said ken.

The lazy man's solution to the problem is to suppose that, in general, the surface of the earth's crust is a fair representation of its interior and that the planet is the same through and through as it is on the surface.

Unfortunately for simplicity, this isn't so on the face of it. If the earth as a whole were as rich in uranium and thorium as the crust is, our planet would melt with the quantity of radioactive heat delivered. Just the fact that the earth is solid, then, shows that those two elements peter out a short distance below earth's skin, and proves that in one small way, at least, heterogeneity with depth exists.

Furthermore, the predominant rock of the continental masses is granite, while the predominant rock of the ocean bottoms would seem to be basalt. Granite is richer in aluminum than basalt is and poorer in magnesium, so that some geologists have visualized the earth's crust as consisting of comparatively light continental blocks rich in aluminum silicate ("sial") floating on a comparatively heavy underpinning rich in magnesium silicate ("sima") with the earth's water supply filling the gaps between the sial blocks.

This is probably an oversimplification, but it still brings up the notion that the composition of the earth changes with depth.—And yet so far it is only the metals that are involved. There is nothing in what I have said that seems to affect the point of silicon/oxygen preponderance. Whatever the change in detail the earth might still be a silicate ball in essence—one big globe of rock, in other words.

The first actual information

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that was obtained about the earth's deep interior, as opposed to pure guesswork, came when Henry Cavendish first determined the mass of the planet in 1798. The volume was known since ancient Greek times and dividing Cavendish's mass by the volume gave the overall density of the earth as 5.52 grams per cubic centimeter.

Now the density of the earth's crust is about 2.8 grams per cubic centimeter and this means that the density must rise with increasing depth. In fact, it must rise well beyond the 5.52 mark to make up for the lower-than-average density of the surface layers.

This, in itself, is no blow to the rock-ball theory of earth's structure, because, obviously, pressure must increase with depth. The weight of overlying layers of rocks must compress the lower layers more and more down to the center where, it is estimated, the pressure is something like 50,000,000 pounds to the square inch. The same rock which had a density of 2.8 grams per cubic centimeter on the surface might conceivably be squeezed to perdition and a density of, say, 12 grams per cubic centimeter at the center of the earth.

A more direct line of attack on the deep interior involved the study of earthquakes. By 1900, the earth was beginning to be girdled by a network of seismographs equipped to study the vibrations set up in the body of the planet by the quakes.

Two main types of earthquake waves are produced, the P (or primary) waves and the S (or secondary) waves. The P waves are longitudinal, alternating bands of compression and expansion, like sound waves. The S waves are transverse and have the ordinary snakelike wiggles we associate with waves. The P waves travel more rapidly than do the S waves and are the first to arrive at a station. The further a station from the actual earthquake the greater the lag in time before the S waves arrive. Three stations working together can use such time-lag data to spot, with great precision, the point of origin ("epicenter") of the earthquake.

Knowing the location of both the earthquake and the station, it is possible to plot the general path taken by the waves through the body of the earth. The greater the distance between the earthquake and the receiving station, the more deeply would the arriving waves have penetrated the body of the earth. If the earth were uniformly dense and rigid, the time taken by the waves to arrive would be in proportion to the distance travelled.

Actually, however, the density of the earth's substance is not uniform with depth and neither is the rigidity of the material. Laboratory experiments on various rocks

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have shown how the velocity of the two types of waves vary with such things as density and rigidity under various temperatures and pressures. Such data can be extrapolated to levels of temperature and pressure that are encountered in the depths of the earth but cannot be duplicated in the laboratory. This is admittedly a risky business—extrapolation always is—but geologists feel confident they can translate the actual velocity of earthquake wave at a given depth into the rock density at that depth.

It turns out then that the density of the earth does increase fairly slowly and smoothly from the 2.8 grams per cubic centimeter at the surface to about 5.9 grams per cubic centimeter at a depth of some 2150 miles.

And then, suddenly, there is a sharp break. The fact that this is so can again be told from the behavior of earthquake waves. As the waves progress through regions of increasing density with depth, then decreasing density as they approach the surface again; they change direction and are refracted, just as light waves are refracted on passing through changing densities of air. As long as the density change is gradual, the direction change is gradual too and forms a smooth curve. This is exactly what happens as long as the wave in its progress does not penetrate more than 2150 miles beneath the surface.

Imagine a station, then, at such a distance from the quake itself that the resulting waves have penetrated to that depth. All stations between itself and the quake receive waves, too, at times varying with the distance, and with penetrations of less than 2150 miles.

A station somewhat further than itself might expect, reasonably enough, to receive waves that have penetrated deeper than 2150 miles—but it receives no waves at all. Yet stations still further away by a thousand miles or so may receive waves clearly, albeit after a longer interval.

In short, there is an area (the "shadow zone") over the earth's surface, forming a kind of doughnut-shape at a fixed distance from each particular earthquake epicenter, in which no waves are felt. The interpretation is that there is a sudden sharp change in direction in any wave penetrating past the 2150 mile mark so that it is sent beyond the shadow zone. The only reason for such a sudden sharp change in direction would be a sudden sharp change in density.

Analysis of arrival times outside the shadow zone shows that this sharp rise in density is from 5.9 to 9.5 grams per cubic centimeter. Below 2150 miles, the density continues to rise smoothly with increasing depth, reaching a value of about 12 grams per cubic centimeter at the center of the earth.

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All this refers to the P waves only. The S waves are even more dramatic in their behavior. When an S wave penetrates below 2150 miles it is not merely altered in direction; it is stopped altogether. The most logical explanation arises from the known fact that longitudinal waves such as the P waves can travel through the body of a liquid, while transverse waves, such as the S waves cannot. Therefore, the regions of the earth lower than 2150 miles must be liquid.

On the basis of earthquake wave data, then, we must assume the earth to consist of a liquid "core" about 1800 miles in radius, which is surrounded by a solid "mantle" about 2,150 miles thick. The sharp division between these two major portions was first clearly demonstrated by the work of the American geologist, Beno Gutenberg in 1914, and is therefore called the "Gutenberg discontinuity."

In 1909, in the meanwhile, a Serbian geologist, named Andrija Mohorovicic (there are two little accent marks, different ones, over the two c's in his name which I don't dare ask the Noble Printer to reproduce) discovered a sudden change in the velocity of earthquake waves on a line about 20 miles below the surface. This is called the "Mohorovicic discontinuity" and, because imagination boggles at the numbers of tonsils that would be thrown into disorder every time such a phrase was mouthed, it is becoming customary to say "Moho" instead. Moho is taken as the line separating the mantle below from the "crust" above.

Since those days, a detailed study of Moho shows that it is not at uniform depth. Under coastal land areas the depth *is* about 20 miles (it is 22 miles under New York, for instance) but under mountainous areas it dives lower, as low as 40 miles. (Since the crust is lighter than the mantle, you could say that mountains are mountains because the unusual concentration of light crust present causes the region to "float high.")

Conversely, Moho comes fairly close to the surface under some parts of the dense ocean bottom, which being comparatively heavy for crust, "float low." In some places, Moho is only 8 to 10 miles below sea-level. This is particularly interesting because the ocean itself is 5 to 7 miles deep in spots and there is no problem in drilling through water. The actual thickness of solid material between ourselves and Moho can be as little as 3 miles if the right spot in the ocean is selected.

It is in one of those spots that we are proposing to dig what you can now see must be called the "Mohole" (what else?) to reach the mantle. What's more, my own suggestion is that the ship carry-

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ing the equipment be named the "Moholder," but I guess that no one will pay any mind to me at all (except for the Kindly Editor, who will pay enough mind to groan).

If we are going to consider the overall composition of the earth, it is only necessary to deal with the core and the mantle. The core makes up only ⅛ of the earth's volume, but because of its relatively high density it represents almost ⅓ of its mass. The remaining ⅔ is the mantle. The crust makes up only 1/250 of the earth's mass, and the hydrosphere and atmosphere are even more insignificant than that. We can therefore completely ignore the only parts of the earth on which we have direct analytical data.

What about the mantle and core, then? The mantle differs from the crust only slightly in density and other properties and everyone agrees that it must be essentially silicate in nature. Experiments in the laboratory show that a rock called olivine (a magnesium iron silicate) will, under high pressure, carry vibrations in the same range of velocities as that at which the mantle transmits earthquake waves. The general impression then is that the mantle differs from the crust in being much more homogeneous, richer in magnesium and poorer in aluminum.

And the core? Still silicate, perhaps, but silicate which, at 2150 miles, undergoes a sudden change in structure? In other words, may it not be that silicate is squeezed more and more tightly with mounting pressure until, at a certain point, something suddenly gives and all the atoms move into a far more compact arrangement? (This is analogous to the way in which the carbon atoms of graphite will move into the more compact arrangement of diamond if pressure and temperature are high enough.)

Some have proposed this, but there is no actual evidence that at the pressures and temperatures involved (which cannot be duplicated as yet in the laboratory) silicate will behave so.

The alternative is that there is a sudden change in chemical nature of the earth's body, with the comparatively light silicate of the mantle giving way to some substance, heavier and liquid, that will make up the core.

But what material? If we arbitrarily restrict ourselves only to the elements common in the crust, the only substance that would be dense enough at deep-earth pressures (and not too dense) and liquid at deep-earth temperatures would be iron.

But isn't this pulling a rabbit out of the hat, too?

Not quite. There is still another line of evidence that, while ter-

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ribly indirect, is so dramatic that the iron core was first suggested by a French geologist named Daubrée in 1866, a generation before earthquake data had pinpointed the existence of a core of some sort. His reasoning was based on the fact that so many meteorites consisted almost entirely of iron. This meant that pure iron could be expected to make up a portion of astronomical bodies and hence why not an iron core to earth.

As a matter of fact there are three kinds of meteorites; the "iron meteorites" already referred to, a group of much more common "stony meteorites," and a relatively rare group of "stony-iron meteorites." It is almost overwhelmingly tempting to suppose that these meteorites are remnants of an earth-like planet (between Mars and Jupiter, where else?) that broke into fragments; that the stony meteorites are fragments of the mantle of that planet; the iron meteorites fragments of its core; and the stony-iron meteorites fragments of an intermediate zone at the bottom of its mantle.

If this is so, and most geologists seem to assume it is, then by analyzing the three sets of meteorites, we are in effect, roughly analyzing the earth's mantle and core.

The stony meteorites have, on the whole, the following composition in percent by weight:

oxygen	43.12
silicon	21.61
magnesium	16.62
iron	13.23
calcium	2.07
aluminum	1.83

As you see, the stony meteorites are mainly a magnesium iron silicate, essentially olivine. This, with calcium and aluminum as major impurities, comes to 98½ percent of the whole. Sodium and potassium, the other metals common in the crust, apparently peter out somewhat in the mantle. It's good to have them where we can reach them, though. They're useful elements and essential to life.

The iron meteorites look like this:

iron	90.78
nickel	8.59
cobalt	0.63

and nothing else is present in significant quantity. Because of such analyses, the earth's core is often referred to as the "nickel-iron core."

As for the composition of the stony-iron meteorites, that is:

iron	61.1
sulfur	34.3
nickel	2.9

This group consists, essentially, of iron sulfide, with a nickel sulfide impurity. Geologists there-

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fore feel that the lowest portion of earth's mantle may well consist of a zone of iron sulfide making up perhaps $\frac{1}{12}$ of the earth's total mass.

Now in order to get a notion of the overall composition of the earth, under the assumption that its various major divisions correspond to the different varieties of meteorites, it is only necessary to get a properly weighted average of the meteoric data. Various geologists have made somewhat different assumptions as to the general composition of this or that part of the mantle and have come up with tables that differ in detail but agree in general.

Here, then, is one summary of the chemical composition of the whole earth in percent by weight:

iron	35.4
oxygen	27.8
magnesium	17.0
silicon	12.6
sulfur	2.7
nickel	2.7

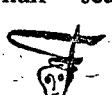
These six elements make up 98 percent of the entire globe. If however, the elements were listed not by weight but by atom number, the relatively light oxygen atoms would gain at the expense of the others and would move into first place. In fact, nearly half (47.2 percent) of all the atoms in the earth are oxygen.

It remains now to give the recipe for a planet such as ours; and I imagine it ought to run something like this, as it would appear in Mother Stellar's Planetary Cook-book:

"Weigh out roughly two septillion kilograms of iron, adding ten percent of nickel as stiffening. Mix well with four septillion kilograms of magnesium silicate, adding five percent of sulfur, to give it that tang, and small quantities of other elements to taste. (Use 'Mother Stellar's Elementary All-Spice' for best results.)

"Heat in a radioactive furnace until the mass is thoroughly melted and two mutually isoluble layers separate. (CAUTION: Do not heat too long as prolonged heating will induce a desiccation that is not desirable.)

"Cool slowly till the crust hardens and a thin film of adhering gas and moisture appears. (If it does not appear, you have overheated.) Place in an orbit at a comfortable distance from a star and set to spinning. Then wait. In several billion years it will ferment at the surface. The fermented portion, which is called life, is considered the best part by connoisseurs."



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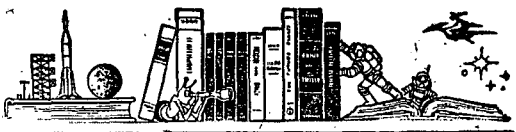

FROM THE EARTH TO THE MOON: ALL AROUND THE MOON, Jules Verne, Dover Publications, $1.75

TO THE SUN? OFF ON A COMET! Jules Verne, Dover Publications, $1.75

The Fabulous World of Jules Verne, presented by Joseph E. Levine, released by Warner Bros.

NEW MAPS OF HELL, Kingsley Amis, Ballantine Books, 35¢

FAR OUT, Damon Knight, Simon and Schuster, $3.95

TIGER BY THE TAIL, Alan E. Nourse, David McKay, $3.50

TURN LEFT AT THURSDAY, Frederik Pohl, Ballantine, 35¢

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE what tremendous progress science fiction has made, we urge you to buy and read the four Jules Verne novels issued by Dover Publications, two to a soft-cover volume, and including the original illustrations from the French editions. For our generation they are also a nostalgic reminder of our childhood when Jules Verne and H. G. Wells were about the only science fiction authors we could find.

Verne was born in Nantes, Feb. 8, 1828, received a classical education, studied law in Paris, and wrote operettas and verse comedies in his spare time. The success of some imaginary travel tales he published in *Musee des Families* showed him the way, and he abandoned law to embark on a series of extravaganzas: VOYAGE TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH, FIVE WEEKS IN A BALLOON, etc.

Written nearly a century ago, his science fiction was charmingly primitive. Verne was a first-rate scholar and researcher; he boned up on his background material in texts, and presented it in lumps in his stories. Whenever he judged that the public might be skeptical of his extrapolations, he took time out for a lecture by one of his characters. Modern science fiction inherited this habit; in the thirties it was almost *de rigueur* for stories to start with: "Now tell me about your invention again, professor."

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Verne's characters followed the "Every man in his humor" formula, also practiced by Wilkie Collins. Each personality had his particular humor or peculiarity, and could be depended upon to respond to any situation in stereotype character. Verne loved to exaggerate national types, and developed a great deal of good-natured comedy from them. Most important of all, he ruled out all love interest; a daring and unusual feat for a French author.

These books are nicely printed by Dover (all of whose publications we admire), are reasonably priced, and deserve a place on your shelves.

While we're on the subject of Jules Verne, we must call to your attention a marvelous film entitled *The Fabulous World of Jules Verne,* which will be released by Warner Bros. in June. Pay no attention to advertisements or publicity releases which, we're sure, will clinch all your interest with maladroit copy. This picture is so witty and unique that no one knows how to promote it.

Filmed in Czechoslovakia with a new process called (Ugh!) *Mystimation,* it is a combination of live and process shots which creates the effect of bringing to life the XIXth century engravings that illustrated Verne's books. One sees all his fabulous imagined inventions as they would have appeared if they had actually been built, and all are depicted with tongue-in-cheek humor.

The plot is a mad camp, too—a combination of situations and incidents taken from all of Verne's stories, spiced with a little Heavy Water, and served up in a glorious goulash. One incident will illustrate this: Simon Hart, the hero, is attempting to escape from a Mysterious Island in a diver's suit. Worried about his oxygen supply, he stops his flight across the ocean floor long enough to pull a bottle out of a pocket in his diver's suit and consult his watch which is in the bottle; and all in dead-pan earnest.

Kingsley Amis' NEW MAPS OF HELL has been reprinted by Ballantine Books, and we've had our first chance to read this critique which created quite a stir in science fiction circles. Mr. Amis, whose first novel, LUCKY JIM, became a XXth century classic overnight, disarmingly admits that he writes only as a fan, and then goes on to make an interesting, amusing, and often penetrating analysis of science fiction, its history, its trends, its weaknesses and its strengths.

Quite frankly, we cannot understand why some of the professionals were outraged by Mr. Amis' sensible and gently expressed opinions. However, you can read the book and figure it out for yourself. We also urge you to read LUCKY

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JIM, the funniest first novel since PICKWICK PAPERS.

Damon Knight, our illustrious predecessor in this department, has brought out thirteen short stories in a fine collection entitled FAR OUT. Mr. Knight is a brilliant craftsman who can handle any story form with crisp finesse: the twist ending ("To Serve Man"), the extra-terrestrial forms ("Cabin Boy"), wild talents ("Special Delivery"), pure fantasy ("You're Another" and "The Last Word"), time travel ("Extempore"), and strange gifts from other times and other spaces ("Thing of Beauty" and "Babel II"). This versatility guarantees something for everybody.

We would prefer to let our review stand on the preceding paragraph, but Mr. Knight is too important an author to be dismissed with a mere notice. Consequently, we must mention what we feel to be a weakness in his work; he is interested in situation rather than character. All thirteen stories are splendid examples of the art of an expert author in the colorful development of situation, but with the exception of a touch here and there, very little attention is devoted to character development.

This by no means implies that Mr. Knight is incapable of character writing. We remember with deep emotion a magnificent character study which Mr. Knight published in this magazine last year, "What Rough Beast." We wonder why he has not pursued this line further; for Art must explore Man to rise above mere cleverness. In his collection Mr. Knight proves himself to be one of the cleverest of science fiction authors. We hope and believe that some day he will rise above this.

TIGER BY THE TAIL, a collection of nine stories by Alan E. Nourse, demonstrates what happens when a disciplined man (Mr. Nourse is a physician in private life) buckles down to the difficult craft of writing and applies himself to it. The result is the triumph of ambition over nature.

Mr. Nourse is not a naturally endowed writer, but he is an assiduous and facile imitator of what has been done before. When his medical background provides him with interesting material, as in "The Coffin Cure" and "The Native Soil," his stories become a little more original. When he gets hold of a genuinely fascinating idea, as in the title story of the collection, he can produce a minor masterpiece. He is to be complimented as a self-made part-time author.

We make this point because we are often asked by young people how to become a writer, and our complicated answer always begins with the warning that writing must be a full-time job if it is ever to rise above mediocrity.

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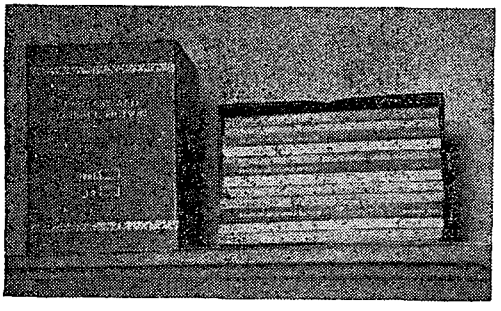
TURN LEFT AT THURSDAY, three novelettes and three stories by Frederik Pohl, is another in a stream of collections, novels, and editings that pour from the pen of Mr. Pohl to the shame of this department and all other lazy writers. Mr. Pohl is prolific, always a craftsman, and sometimes touched with genius. In NEW MAPS OF HELL, Kingsley Amis pays tribute to Mr. Pohl who, he believes, is probably the finest science fiction author practicing today.

This collection is a fair sampling of Mr. Pohl's work, and illustrates an observation we would like to make about the author. In the standard forms of science fiction, Mr. Pohl is only competent, as for example, in "Mars by Moonlight" and "The Seven Deadly Virtues," rather mechanical extrapolations of the We Are Owned theme, and the What Would Happen If theme. (What would happen if a community hypnotically conditioned its people against anti-social behaviour?)

But it is in satire that Mr. Pohl rises to heights, as in "I Plingot, Who You?" and as he did with Cyril Kornbluth in THE SPACE MERCHANTS, which we believe to be the finest novel ever produced by science fiction. When Mr. Pohl is biting, he is dangerously brilliant, and this department hopes to remain in his good books for fear of the consequences.

—Alfred Bester



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The third in a series of "Hothouse" stories by a refreshingly imaginative English writer, who takes us this time in the direction of cooler country.

UNDERGROWTH

by Brian W. Aldiss

I

LITTLE SILENT THINGS WITHOUT minds sped around the highway, appearing from and disappearing into the dark greens that surrounded it.

Two fruit cases moved along the highway. From under them, two pairs of eyes looked askance at the silent things, and flitted here and there like the things themselves in their search for danger.

The highway was a vertical one; the anxious eyes could see neither its beginning nor its end. Occasional branches forked horizontally from the highway; these were ignored in the slow but steady progress. The surface of the highway was rough, providing excellent holds for the moving fingers and toes that protruded from the fruit cases. Also, the surface was cylindrical, for the highway was one trunk of a mighty banyan tree.

This banyan was terribly old, terribly enduring. Encouraged by the freak conditions on the planet, nourished by benevolent radiations from the sun, it had grown hand in hand with the changeless years until it encompassed the whole of the continent on which it flourished.

The two fruit cases moved from its upper tips towards the ground far below. Gradually the layers of foliage filtered out the light, so that they seemed to move now in a green mist towards a tunnel of black.

At last the leading fruit case hesitated and turned aside onto one of the horizontal branches, pursuing a scarcely visible trail. The other case followed it. Together they sat up, half leaning against each other, and with their backs to their erstwhile highway.

Now beneath the cases which had been assumed for protection they revealed themselves as two beings belonging to what was left of the human race, long-armed, long-legged creatures puny of body

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and blank of face, with hard thorn knives tucked into their belts.

One of them was female; her name was Poyly. One of them was male; his name was Gren.

"I fear going down towards the Ground," Poyly whispered.

"So do I, for we were meant to live in the safe levels below the Tips," Gren said.

"Need we go further?" Poyly asked in a tiny voice, taking hold of his wrist.

Then they waited with a timorous patience for another voice that they knew would answer them.

"Yes, you shall go further, Poyly and Gren, for I advise you to go and I will never leave you." This voice was unlike theirs. It was a voice made without lips and heard without ears, a voice born and dying within their heads like a jack-in-the-box eternally imprisoned in its little chest. It had the tone of a dusty harp.

"I have brought you so far in safety," the voice continued, "and I will take you further in safety. I taught you to wear the fruit cases and already we have come a long way in them unharmed. Go a little further and there will be glory for you."

"We need a rest, morel," Gren said.

"Rest and then we will go on. We have found the traces of another human tribe—this is not the time to be faint of heart. It is necessary for us to find the tribe."

Obeying the voice, the two humans lay down to rest. The cumbersome skins, hacked from two of the oedematous fruits of the forest, crudely pierced with holes for their legs and arms, prevented them from lying flat. They crouched as they could, limbs sprawling upwards as if they had been crushed to death by the weight of the leafage above them.

A curious ruff circled the necks of the two humans. It glistened darkly and was intricately patterned. At the back of their necks it turned upwards and could be seen wetly amid the tufts of their hair. It was alive.

This fungus, for such it was, had fallen on them in another part of the continent called Nomansland.

In this age of vegetables, many plants had taken over ancient animal and insect forms, and had specialized in size while remaining brainless. The morel fungus, however, had specialized in intelligence—the sharp and limited intelligence of the jungle. To further its own wider propagation, it could become parasite on other species, adding its deductive powers to their mobility.

This morel, which had bisected itself to take over both Poyly and Gren, laboured at present under constant surprise as it discovered in their nervous centres something that no other creature possessed—a memory, a memory of both the

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recent past, and hidden even from its possessors, of a dim racial past.

Although the morel was unaware of the phrase 'In the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king,' it was nevertheless in the same position of power. The life forms of the great hothouse world lived out their days in ferocity or flight, pursuit or peace, before falling to the green and forming compost for the next generation. For them there was no past and no future. They were like figures woven into a tapestry, without depth. The morel, tapping human minds, was different. It had perspective.

It was the first creature in a billion years to be able to look back down the long avenues of time. Prospects emerged that frightened, dizzied, and nearly silenced it. The harp-like cadences of its voice grew more infrequent in Gren's and Poyly's mind.

"How can morel protect us from the terrors of the Ground?" Poyly asked after a spell. "How can he protect us from a wiltmilt or a dripperlip?"

"He knows things," Gren said simply. "He made us put on these fruit skins to hide us from enemies. They have kept us safe. When we find this other tribe we will be still safer."

"My fruit skin chafes my thighs," Poyly said, with a womanly gift for irrelevance that eons of time had not quenched.

As she lay there, she felt her mate's hand grope for her thigh and rub it tenderly. But her eyes still wandered among the boughs overhead, alert for danger.

A vegetable thing as bright as a parakeet fluttered down and settled on a branch above them. Almost at once a jittermop fell from its concealment above, dropping smack onto the vegbird. Antipathetic liquids splashed. Then the broken vegbird was drawn up out of sight, only a smear of green juice marking where it had been.

"A jittermop, Gren! We should move on," Poyly said, "before it falls on us."

The morel too had seen this struggle—had in fact watched with approval, for vegbird were great fanciers of a tasty morel.

"We will move, humans, if you are ready," it said. One pretext for moving on was as good as another; being parasitic, it needed no rest.

They were reluctant to move from their temporary comfort even to avoid a jittermop, so the morel prodded them. As yet it was gentle enough with them, not wishing to provoke a contest of wills and needing their co-operation. Its ultimate objective was vague, vainglorious, and splendid. It saw itself reproducing again and again, until fungus covered the Earth instead of the forest, filling every hill and valley with its brown convolutions.

Such an end could not be achieved without humans. They

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would be its means. Now—in its cold leisurely way—it needed as many humans under its sway as it could get. So it prodded. So Gren and Poyly obeyed.

They climbed back onto the trunk that was their highway head down, clinging to its rounded surface, and resumed their advance.

Other creatures used the same route, some harmless like the leafabians, making their endless leafy caravanserais from the depths of the jungle to its heights, some far from harmless, green in tooth and claw. But one species had left minute distinguishing marks down the trunk, a stab mark here, a stain there, that to a trained eye meant that humanity was somewhere near at hand. It was this trail the two humans followed.

The great tree and the denizens of its shade went about their business in silence. So did Gren and Poyly. When the marks they pursued turned along a wide branch, they turned too, without discussion.

So they moved, horizontally and vertically, until Poyly glimpsed a flitting form ahead. Ducking among the leaves, the figure plunged for safety into a clump of fuzzypuzzle on a branch ahead.

"You stay and watch for others. I'll get this one," she said. "Signal soon to trick it."

Sliding forward on her belly, she edged over the curve of the branch until she hung upside down under it. She began to work her way along. As she did so, the morel, anxious for its own safety in an exposed position, invaded her mind. Her perceptions became extraordinarily sharp, her vision clearer, her skin more sensitive.

"Go in from behind. Capture it, don't kill it, and it will lead us to the rest of its tribe," twanged the voice in her head.

"Hush, or it'll hear," she breathed.

"Only you and Gren can hear me, Poyly, and I shall never leave you."

Poyly crawled beyond the fuzzypuzzle patch before climbing onto the upper side of the branch again, never rustling the leaves about her as she did so. Slowly she slid forward.

Above the soft lollipop heads of the fuzzypuzzle she spied her quarry's head. She saw it was a female looking guardedly about, was near enough to read the alert anxiety on her face.

"She did not recognize you under your fruit cases as human, so she hides from you," said the morel.

That was silly, Poyly thought to herself. Whether this female recognized us or not, she would always hide from strangers. The morel sucked the thought from her brain and understood why his reasoning had been false; for all he had already learnt, the whole notion of a human being was still alien to him.

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Tactfully he removed himself from Poyly's mind, leaving her free to tackle the stranger in her own way.

Poyly moved a step nearer, and another step, bent almost double. Head down, and waited for Gren to signal as instructed.

On the other side of the fuzzy-puzzle patch, Gren shook a twig. The strange female stiffened and peered in the direction of the noise. Before she could pull the knife from her belt, Poyly jumped on her from behind.

They struggled in among the soft fibres, the stranger grappling for Poyly's throat. Poyly in return bit her in the shoulder. Bursting in, Gren gripped the stranger round her neck and tagged her backwards. She put up a savage struggle, but they had her. Soon she was bound and lay panting face downwards on the branch.

"You have done well! Now she will lead us—" began the morel.

"Quiet!" Gren rasped, so that the fungus instantly obeyed.

Something moved fast in the tree above them.

Gren knew the forest. He knew that predators were always attracted by sounds of struggle. Hardly had he spoken when a thinpin came spiralling down the nearest trunk like a spring, and launched itself at them. Gren was ready for it.

Swords were useless against thinpins. He caught it a blow with a stick, sending it spinning. It anchored itself by a springy tail before rearing to strike again—and a rayplane curved down from the foliage above, snapped up the thinpin, and swooped on.

Poyly and Gren flung themselves flat beside their victim and waited. The terrible silences of the forest came in again like a tide all round them. It was safe again.

II

Their captive was almost speechless. She shook her head sullenly at Poyly's questioning, though they elicited from her the fact that she went by the name of Yattmur. Obviously she was alarmed by the sinister ruff about their necks and the glistening lumps on their heads.

"Morel, she is too fearful to speak," Gren said. "She does not care for the look of you. Shall we leave her and go on?"

"Hit her and then she may speak," twanged the silent voice of the morel.

"But that will make her more fearful."

"It may loosen her tongue. Hit her face."

"Even though she is causing me no danger?"

"She causes us all danger by delaying us."

"I suppose she does. I never thought of that. You think deep, morel."

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He raised his hand hesitantly. Morel twitched at his muscles. The hand came down violently across Yattmur's cheek, jerking her head. Poyly winced and looked questioningly at her mate.

"You foul creature! My tribe will kill you," Yattmur threatened.

His eyes gleaming, Gren raised his hand again.

"Do you want another blow? Tell us where you live."

The girl struggled ineffectually.

"I am only a herder. You do wrong to harm me if you are of my kind. What harm did I do you?"

"We need answers to questions. You will not be hurt if you answer our questions." Again his hand came up.

"I am a herder—I herd the jumpvils. It is not my job to fight or to answer questions. I can take you to my tribe if you wish."

"Tell us where your tribe is."

"It lives on the skirt of the Black Mouth, which is only a small way from here. We are peaceful people."

"The Skirt of the Black Mouth? Will you take us there?"

"Do you mean us harm?"

"We mean no harm to anyone. Besides you can see there are only two of us. Why should you be afraid?"

Yattmur put on a sullen face, as if she doubted his words.

"You must let me up then, and set my arms free. I will not run away."

"My sword through your side if you do," Gren said.

"You are learning," the morel said with approval.

So Yattmur was released from her bonds and began to climb down among the silent leaves, her two captors following close. They exchanged no more words, but in Poyly's heart doubts rose, particularly when she saw that the nature of the jungle changed and that the endless uniformity of the banyan was breaking.

Following Yattmur, they still descended. One great mass of broken stone crowned with nettle-moss and berrywhish thrust itself up beside their way, and then another. But although they descended, it grew lighter overhead; which meant the banyan was here far from its average height. Its branches twisted and thinned. A spear of sunlight pierced through to the travellers. The Tips were almost meeting the ground. What could it mean?

Poyly whispered the question in her mind, and the morel answered.

"The forest must fail somewhere. We are coming to a broken land where it cannot grow. Do not be alarmed."

"We must be coming to the Skirt of the Black Mouth. I fear the sound of it, morel. Let us go back before we meet fatal trouble."

"We have no back to go to, Poyly. We are wanderers. We can

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only go on. Have no fear. I will help you and I shall never leave you."

Now the branches grew too weak and narrow to bear them. With a flying leap, Yattmur threw herself onto a massive outcrop of rock. Poyly and Gren landed beside her. They lay there looking at each other questioningly. Then Yattmur raised a hand.

"Listen! Some jumpvils coming!" she exclaimed, as a sound came like rain through the forest.

Below their island of rock stretched the Ground. It was not the foul quagmire of decay and death about which Gren and Poyly had so often been warned in their tribal days. It was curiously broken and pitted, like a frozen sea, and coloured red and black. Few plants grew in it. Instead, it seemed to have a frozen life of its own, so indented was it with holes that had stretched themselves into agonized navels, eye sockets, or leering mouths.

"The rocks have evil faces," Poyly whispered as she gazed down.

"Quiet! They're coming this way," Yattmur said.

As they looked and listened, a horde of strange creatures poured over the pitted ground, loping from the depths of the forest with a strange gait. They were fibrous creatures, plants that over an immensity of eons had roughly learnt to copy the hare family.

Their running was slow and clumsy by the standards of the beasts they superseded. As they moved, their fibrous sinews cracked sharply; they lurched from side to side. Each jumpvil had a head all scoop jaw and enormous ears, while its body was without line and irregularly coloured. But most incongruous was the difference in length between hind and front legs. The front legs were more like poor stumps, small and clumsy, while the back pair were much longer and captured at least something of the grace of an animal's leg.

Little of this was apparent to Gren and Poyly. To them, the jumpvils were merely a strange new species of creature with inexplicably ill-shaped legs. To Yattmur they obviously meant something different.

Before they came into sight she pulled a weighted line from round her waist and balanced it between her hands. As the horde thudded and clacked below the rock, she flung it dexterously. The line extended itself into a sort of elementary net, with the weights swinging at key points.

It tripped three of the queer-limbed creatures. At once Yattmur scrambled down, jumped at the jumpvils before they could right themselves, and secured them to the line.

All the rest ran on and disappeared. The three that had been

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captured stood submissively in impassive vegetable defeat. Yattmur looked challengingly at Gren and Poyly as if relieved to have shown her mettle—but Poyly ignored her, pointing into the clearing ahead of them and shrinking against her companion.

"Gren! Look! A—a monster, Gren!" she said in a strangled voice.

Against a wide shoulder of rock, and near the path of the fleeing jumpvils, a silvery envelope was inflating. It stretched out into a great globe far higher than any human.

"It's a greenguts! Don't watch it!" Yattmur cried. "It makes a bad thing for humans!"

But they watched fascinated, for the envelope was now a soggy sphere, and on that sphere was one eye, a huge jelly-like eye with a green pupil. The eye swivelled. A vast gap appeared low down in the envelope.

The last few retreating jumpvils saw it, paused, then staggered round on a new course. Six of them jumped through the gap. It closed over them like a mouth, while at the same time the envelope began to collapse.

"May I Go Up!" Gren gasped. "What is it?"

"It is a greenguts," Yattmur said, shivering. "There are many of them about, stuck to the tall rocks. We must go on."

The morel thought differently. It twanged in the heads of Gren and Poyly. Reluctantly they moved towards the shoulder of rock.

By the time they reached it, the greenguts had entirely collapsed. It was drawn in, adhering to the rock like so many folds of wet tissue. A still moving bulge near the ground marked its bag of jumpvils. As they surveyed it in horror, it surveyed them with its one striated green eye. Then the eye closed, and they seemed to be looking only at rock. The camouflage was perfect.

"It cannot hurt us," twanged the morel. "It is nothing but a stomach."

They moved away. Again they followed Yattmur, walking painfully on the broken ground, the three captive creatures humping along by their sides as if this was something they did every day.

The ground sloped upwards. In their heads, the morel suggested that this was why the banyan was falling away overhead, and waited to see what they would answer.

Poyly said, "Perhaps these jumpvils have long back legs to help them get uphill."

"It must be so," said the morel.

But that's absurd, thought Gren, for what about when they want to run downhill again? The morel cannot know everything, or it would not agree to Poyly's silly idea.

"You are right that I do not

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know everything," twanged the morel, surprising him. "But I am capable of learning quickly, which you are not—for unlike some past members of your race, you work mainly by instinct."

"What is instinct?"

"Green thoughts," said the morel, and would not elaborate.

At length Yattmur halted. Her first sullenness had worn away, as if the journey had made them friends. Glancing at her companions, she told them that they had reached the home of her tribe.

"Call them, then, and tell them that we come with good desires and that I shall speak to them," Gren said, adding anxiously for the morel's benefit, "but I don't know what to say to them."

"I shall tell you."

Yattmur raised a clenched hand to her lips and blew a piping note through it. Alertly, Poyly and her mate looked about them. . . . Leaves rustled, and they became surrounded by warriors who seemed to rise up from the ground. Glancing upwards, Poyly saw strange faces there regarding her from the branches overhead.

Gren and Poyly stood absolutely still.

Slowly Yattmur's tribe came closer. Most of them, as was customary, were female, with flowers adorning their private parts. All were armed. Several of them wore round their waists the same weighted trapping lines that Yattmur had carried.

"Herders," Yattmur said, "I have brought you two strangers, Poyly and Gren, who wish to join us."

Prompted by the morel, Poyly said, "We are wanderers who can do you no harm. Make us welcome if you wish to Go Up in peace. We need rest and shelter now but later we can show you our skills."

One of the group, a stocky woman with braided hair in which was inserted a gleaming shell, stood forward. She held out her hand palm upwards.

"Greetings, strangers. I am called Hutweer. I lead these herders. If you join us, you follow me. Do you consent to that?"

If we do not consent, they may kill us, thought Gren.

Right from the first we must show we are leaders, replied the morel.

Their knives point at us, Gren told it.

We must lead from the start or not at all, the morel returned.

As they stood wrapped in conflict, Hutweer clapped her hands impatiently.

"Answer, strangers! Will you follow Hutweer?"

We must agree, morel.

No, Gren, we cannot afford to.

But they will kill us!

You must kill her first then, Poyly!

No!

I say yes.

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No . . . No . . . No . . .

Their thoughts grew more fierce as a three-cornered argument grew up.

"Herders, alert!" Hutweer called. Dropping her hand to her sword belt, she came a pace nearer, her face stern. Obviously these strangers were not friends.

To the strangers something strange was happening. They began to writhe, as if in an unearthly dance. Poyly's hands twisted up to the darkly glistening ruff about her neck, and then fell away again. Gren's hands went down to his sword and then curved away as if dragged by force. Both of them twisted slowly and stamped their feet. Their faces stretched and wrinkled in an unknown pain. From their mouths came foam, and in their extremity they urinated upon the hard ground.

Slowly they moved, staggered, turned, arching their bodies, biting their lips, while their eyes glared madly at nothing.

The herders dropped back in awe.

"They fell on me from the sky! They must be spirits!" Yattmur cried, covering her face.

Hutweer dropped the sword she had drawn, her countenance pale. It was a sign to her followers. With frightened haste they dropped their weapons and sank to their knees. They groaned in their prostration, hiding their faces in their hands.

Directly the morel saw that it had inadvertently achieved what it had wished to do, it ceased trying to impose its will on Gren and Poyly. As the wrenching pressure on their minds relaxed, they would have fallen had the fungus not stiffened them again.

"We have won the victory we need, Poyly," it said in its harplike voice. "Hutweer kneels before us. Now you must speak to them."

"I hate you, morel," she said sullenly. "Make Gren do your work—I won't."

Strongly prompted by the fungus, Gren went over to Hutweer and raised her.

"Now you have acknowledged us," he said, "you need fear no more. Only never forget that we are spirits inhabited by spirits. We will work with you. Together we shall establish a mighty tribe where we can live in peace. Human beings will no longer be fugitives of the forest. We are going to lead you out of the forest to greatness."

"The way out of the forest is only just ahead," Yattmur ventured timidly.

"Will you free us from the great spirit of the Black Mouth?" Hutweer enquired more boldly. Some of her courage was returning.

"You shall be led as you deserve," Gren declared. "First my fellow spirit, Poyly, and I desire food and sleep, then we will talk more. Take us now to your place of safety."

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Hutweer bowed—and disappeared into the ground beneath her feet.

III

The tortured lava bed on which they were standing was pierced by many holes. Under some of these, the earth had fallen away or had been scooped away by the herders. Here they lived in something like safety and something like darkness, in a cave provided with bolt holes so conveniently situated overhead that they could vanish in a flash when danger threatened at ground level.

With Yattmur helping them, Poyly and Gren were induced to go down into the gloom more gently than Hutweer had done. There they were seated on couches and a meal was brought to them almost at once.

For the first time, they tasted Jumpvil, which the herders had flavoured in a way unknown to the two travellers, with spices to make it tempting and peppers to make it hot. Jumpvil, Yattmur explained, was one of their chief dishes; but they had a specialty, and this was now set before Gren and Poyly with some deference.

"It is called fish," Yattmur said, when they expressed their satisfaction with it. "It comes from the Long Water that pours from the Black Mouth."

At this, the morel became attentive and made Gren ask, "How do you catch this fish?"

"We do not catch them. We do not go to the Long Water. A tribe called Fishers live there. Sometimes we meet them, and as we are friendly with them we exchange jumpvil for fish."

Confusedly, Poyly felt shame that she and her mate should be respected by a tribe seemingly more civilized than the one from which they came. Trying to work out exactly what their advantages were, she asked Hutweer, "Are there not many enemies around you?"

Hutweer smiled.

"There are very few enemies here. The big enemy, the Black Mouth, swallows them. We live near the Black Mouth because we believe one big enemy is easier to deal with than a lot of small ones."

At this the morel began to confer urgently with Gren. Gren had now learnt to talk in his mind with the morel without speaking aloud, an art Poyly never mastered.

"We must examine this Mouth of which they talk so much," the morel twanged. "The sooner the better. And since you have lost face by eating with them like an ordinary human, you must also make them a stirring speech. The two must go together. Let us find out this Mouth and show them how little we fear it by speaking there."

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"No, morel! You think clever but you don't think sense! If these fine herders fear the Black Mouth, I am prepared to do the same."

"If you think like that, we are lost."

"Poyly and I are tired. You do not know what tiredness is. Let us sleep as you promised us."

"First we must show how strong we are."

"How can we when we are weak from tiredness?" Poyly interposed.

"Do you want to be killed while you sleep?"

So the morel had its way, and Gren and Poyly demanded to be taken to look at the Black Mouth.

At this the herders were startled. Hutweer silenced their murmurs of apprehension.

"It shall be as you say, O Spirits. Come forth, Iccall," she cried, and at once a young male with a white fishbone in his hair jumped forward. He held his hand palm upwards in greeting to Poyly.

"Young Iccall is our best Singer," Hutweer said. "With him you will come to no harm. He will show you the Black Mouth and bring you back here. We will await your return."

They climbed up again in the broad and everlasting daylight. As they stood blinking, feeling the hot uneven pumice beneath their feet, Iccall smiled brilliantly at Poyly and said, "I know you feel tired, but it is only a little way I have to take you."

"Oh, I'm not tired, thank you," Poyly said, smiling back, for Iccall had large dark eyes and a soft skin. "That is a pretty bone in your hair, shaped like the veins of a leaf."

"They are very rare—perhaps I might get you one."

"Let's move if we are going," Gren said sharply to Iccall, thinking he had never seen a man grin so foolishly. "How can a mere singer—if that is what you are—be of any use against this mighty enemy, the Black Mouth?"

"Because when the Mouth sings, I sing—and I sing better," said Iccall, not at all upset, and he led the way among the leaves and the broken pillars of rock, swaggering a little as he went.

As he foretold, they did not have far to go. The ground continued to rise gently and became more and more coated with the black and red igneous rock, so that nothing could grow there. Even the banyan, which had crossed a thousand miles of continent in its sinewy stride, was forced to draw back here. Its last trunks still showed burns from the last lava flow. Yet its outermost branches dropped aerial roots which explored among the rock with greedy fingers.

Iccall brushed past these roots and crouched behind a boulder. He pointed ahead.

"There is Black Mouth", he whispered.

For Poyly and Gren it was a

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strange experience. For the first time ever they looked out over a stretch of open country; the whole idea of open country was completely unknown to them. They were forest folk. Now their eyes stared ahead in wonder that a prospect could be so strange.

Broken and tumbled, the lava field stretched away from them. It tilted and shaped up towards the sky in a manner that seemed unbelievable to Poyly, until it twisted into a great ragged cone which dominated the scene for all that it stood some distance away.

"That is the Black Mouth," whispered Iccall, again enjoying Poyly's obvious astonishment.

He stabbed his finger to a suspiration of smoke that rose from the lip of the cone and trickled up into the sky.

"The Mouth breathes," he said.

Gren pulled his eyes away from the cone to the forest beyond it, the eternal forest reasserting itself. Then his eyes went back fascinated to the cone and his heart beat faster. At the same time he felt the morel grope deep into his mind, a dizzying sensation that made him brush his hand over his forehead. His sight blurred as the morel resented his gesture.

The morel bored down deeper into the sludge of Gren's unconscious memory like a drunken man pawing through the faded photographs of a legacy. Confusion overwhelmed Gren; he too glimpsed these brief pictures, some of them extremely poignant, without being able to grasp their content. Swooning, he pitched over onto the lava.

Poyly and Iccall lifted him up —but already the fit was over and the morel had what it needed.

Triumphantly it flashed a picture at Gren. As he revived, the morel explained to him.

"These herders fear shadows, Gren. We need not fear. Their mighty Mouth is only a volcano, and a small one at that. It will do no harm. Probably it is all but extinct." And he showed Gren and Poyly what a volcano was from the knowledge he had dredged out of their memory.

Reasurred, they returned to the tribe's subterranean home, where Hutweer, Yattmur and the others awaited them.

"We have seen your Black Mouth and have no fear of it," Gren declared.

"When the Black Mouth calls, everyone must go to it," Hutweer said. "Though you may be mighty, you scoff because you have only seen the Mouth in its silence. When it sings, we will see how you dance, O spirits!"

Poyly asked about the Fishers, the tribe Yattmur had mentioned.

"From where we stood we could not see their home trees," Iccall said. "From the belly of the Black Mouth comes the Long Water. That also we did not see for the rise of the land. Beside the Long

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Water stand the trees, and there live the Fishers."

At this the morel entered into Poyly's thought, prompting her to ask, "If the Fishers live so much nearer to the Black Mouth than you, O Hutweer, by what magic then do they survive when the Mouth calls?"

The herders muttered among themselves, keen to find an answer to her question. None presented itself to them. At length one of the women said, "The Fishers have long green tails, O spirit."

This reply satisfied neither her nor the others. Gren laughed, and the morel launched him into a speech.

"Oh you children of an empty mouth, you know too little and guess too much! Can you believe that people are able to grow long green tails? You are simple and helpless and we will lead you. We shall go down to the Long Water when we have slept and all of you will follow.

"There we will make a Great Tribe, at first uniting with the Fishers, and then with other tribes in the forests. No longer shall we run in fear. All other things will fear us."

In the reticulations of the morel's brain grew a picture of the plantation these humans would make for it. There it would propagate in peace, tended by its humans. At present—it felt the handicap strongly—it had not sufficient bulk to bisect itself again, and so take over some of the herders. But as soon as it could manage it, the day would come when it would grow in peace in a well-tended plantation, there to take over control of all humans. Eagerly it compelled Gren to speak again.

"We shall no longer be poor things of the undergrowth. We will kill the undergrowth. We will kill the jungle and all its bad things. We will allow only good things. We will have gardens and in them we will grow—strength and more strength, until the world is ours as it was once long ago."

Silence fell. The herders looked uneasily at each other, anxious yet half-defiant.

In her head, Poyly thought that the things Gren said were too big and without meaning. Gren himself was past caring. Though he looked on the morel as a strong friend, he hated the sensation of being forced to speak and act in a way often just beyond his comprehension.

Wearily, he flung himself down into a corner and dropped asleep almost immediately. Equally indifferent to what the others thought, Poyly too lay down and went to sleep.

At first the herders stood looking down in puzzlement at them. Then Hutweer clapped her hands for them to disperse.

"Let them sleep," she said.

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"We shall see how these spirits behave when the spirit of the Black Mouth sings," Iccall said, as he climbed outside.

IV

While Poyly and Gren slept, the morel did not sleep. Sleep was not in its nature.

Its objectives were the limited and practical ones of a vegetable: to survive and to propagate successfully in the crowded jungle world. The equipment its kind had developed to do this was basically simple: they became parasites of creatures which, when their native cunning was supplemented with a morel's thought system, could carry them to new seeding areas. Standards of native cunning, however, were low in the hothouse vegetable world. To merge brains with human beings was more a difference of kind than degree.

The morel, in fact, was like a small boy who dashes into a cave only to find it full of jewels; he had staggered into wealth unsuspected even by its owner and was so constituted that he could not help examining it. His first predatory investigation merged into excited wonder.

That sleep which Gren and Poyly slept was disturbed by many strange fantasies. Whole blocks of past experience loomed up like cities in a fog, blazed on their dreaming eye, and were gone. Working with no preconceptions which might have provoked antagonism from the unconscious levels through which it sank, the morel burrowed back through the obscure corridors of memory where Gren's and Poyly's intuitive responses were stored.

The journey was long. Many of its signs, eroded by countless generations, were misleading. The morel worked down to records of the days before the sun had begun to radiate extra energy, to the days when man was a far more intelligent and aggressive being than his present arboreal counterpart. It surveyed the great civilizations in wonder and puzzlement—and then it plunged back still further, far back, into the longest, mistiest epoch of man's history, before history began, before he had so much as a fire to warm him at night, or a brain to guide his hand at hunting.

And there the morel, groping among the very shards of human memory, made its astonishing find. It lay inert for many heartbeats before it could digest something of the import of what it chanced on.

Twanging at their brains, it roused Gren and Poyly. Though they turned over exhaustedly, there was no escaping that inner voice.

"Gren. Poyly! I have made a great discovery! We are more nearly brothers than you know!"

Pulsing with an emotion they had never before known it to show, the morel forced on them pictures

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stored in their own limbos of unconscious memory.

It showed them first the great age of man, an age of fine cities and roads, an age of hazardous journeys to the nearer planets. The time was one of great organization and aspiration, of communities, communes, and committees. Yet the people were not noticeably happier than their predecessors. Like their predecessors, they lived in the shade of various pressures and antagonisms. All too easily they were crushed by the million under economic or total warfare.

Next, the morel showed, Earth's temperatures began to climb as the sun went into its destructive phase. Confident in their technology, the people prepared to meet this emergency.

"Show us no more," Poyly whispered, for these scenes were very bright and painful. But the morel paid her no heed, still continuing to force knowledge upon her.

As preparations were made, people began to fall sick. The sun was pouring out a new band of radiation, and gradually all mankind succumbed to the strange sickness. It affected their skin, their eyes—and their brains.

After a prolonged spell of suffering, they became immune to the radiations. They crawled forth from their beds. But something had changed. They no longer had the power to command and cogitate and fight.

They crawled away from their great and beautiful towns, left their cities, deserted their houses —as if all that had once been home had suddenly become alien. Their social structures also collapsed, and all organization died overnight. The weeds began to flourish in the streets, and the pollen to blow over the cash registers, and the jungle to grow in an all-conquering wave.

The downfall of man happened not gradually but in one dreadful rush, like the collapse of a tall tower.

"It's enough," Gren told the morel, struggling against its power. "What is past is no concern of ours. Why should we care what happened so very long ago? You've worried us enough! Now let us sleep."

A curious sensation took him, as if his inside were being rattled while his outside remained still. The morel was metaphorically shaking him by the shoulders.

"You are so indifferent," twanged the morel, still gripped by excitement. "You must attend. Look! We are going back now to very distant days, when man had no history or heritage, when he was not even Man. He was then a puny thing similar to what you are now . . ."

And Poyly and Gren could do nothing but see the visions that followed. Though the glimpses were blurred and muddy, they

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watched tarsier-like people sliding down trees and running barefoot among the ferns. They were small people, nervous and without language. They squatted and pranced and hid in bushes. No detail was clear, for there was no clear perception to record it. Scents and sounds were sharp—yet taunting as a riddle. The humans saw merely flashes of half-light, as in that primaeval world the little lives scampered and enjoyed and died.

For no reason that they recognized, nostalgia flooded them and Poyly wept.

A clearer picture came. A group of the little people paddled in marsh under giant ferns. From the ferns, things dropped, landing on their heads. The things that dropped were recognizable—as morel fungi.

"In that early oligocene world, my kind was the first to develop intelligence," twanged the morel. "There's the proof of it! In ideal conditions of bloom and moisture we first discovered the power of thought. But thought needs limbs it can direct. So we became parasitic on those small creatures, your remote ancestors!"

And it pushed Poyly and Gren forward in time again, showing them the true history of the development of man, which was also the history of the morels. For the morels, which began as parasites, developed into symbiotes.

At first they clung to the outsides of the skulls of the tarsier-people. Then as those people prospered under the connection, as they were taught to organize and hunt, they were induced, generation by slow generation, to increase their skull capacity. At last the vulnerable morels were able to move inside, to become truly a part of the people, to improve their own abilities under a curving shelter of bone. . . .

"So the real race of men developed," intoned the morel, throwing up a storm of pictures. "They grew and conquered the world, forgetting the origins of their success, the morel brains which lived and died with them. . . . Without us, they would still have remained among the trees, even as your tribes live now without our aid."

To enforce its point, it again provoked their latent memories of the time when the sun had entered its latest phase and all mankind fell sick.

"Men were physically stronger than morels. Though they survived the stepping-up of solar radiation, their symbiotic brains did not. *They* quietly died, boiled alive in the little bone shelters they had fashioned for themselves. Man was left . . . to fend for himself equipped only with his natural brains, which were no better than those of the higher animals. . . . Small wonder he lost

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his splendid cities and took again to the trees!"

"It means nothing to us . . . nothing at all," Gren whimpered. "Why do you haunt us now with this ancient disaster, which all finished uncounted millions of years ago?"

The morel gave a silent noise like laughter in his head.

"Because the drama may not yet be finished! I am a sturdier strain than those of my bygone ancestors; I can tolerate high radiation. So can your kind. Now is the historic moment for us to begin another symbiosis as great and profitable as the one which once tempered those tarsiers until they rode among the stars! Again the clocks of intelligence begin to chime. The clocks have hands again . . ."

"Gren, it is mad and I do not understand!" Poyly cried, appalled by the turmoil behind her closed eyes.

"Hear the clocks chime!" twanged the morel.

"Oh! Oh! I can hear them!" Gren moaned, twisting restlessly where he lay.

And in all their ears came a sound to drown all else, a chiming sound like diabolic music.

"Gren, we are all going mad!" Poyly cried. "The terrible noises!"

"The chimes, the chimes!" the morel twanged.

Then Poyly and Gren awoke, sitting up in a sweat with the morel afire about their heads and necks—and the terrible sound still came, more terrible still!

V

Through the disturbed race of their thoughts they perceived that they were now the sole occupants of the cavern under the lava bed. All the herders had gone.

The terrifying noises they could hear came from outside. Why they should be so frightening was hard to say. The main sound was almost a melody, though it gave no prospect of resolution. It sang not to the ear but to the blood, and the blood responded by alternately freezing and racing to its call.

"We must go!" Poyly said, struggling up.

"What have I done?" wailed the morel.

"What's gone wrong?" Gren asked.

They clung together in fear, yet the urge in their veins would not let them remain. Their limbs moved without obedience. Whatever the dreadful tune was, it had to be followed to its source. Even the morel had no thought but to do otherwise.

Regardless of their bodies, they scrambled up the rock fall that served as stairs and into the open, to find themselves in the midst of nightmare.

Now the awful melody blew

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about them like a wind, though not a leaf moved. Frenziedly it plucked and tugged at their limbs. Nor were they the only creatures answering that siren call. Flying things and running things and hopping things and things that slithered battered their way through the clearing, all heading in one direction—towards the Black Mouth.

"The Black Mouth!" the morel cried. "The Black Mouth sings to us and we must go!"

It tugged not only at their ears but at their eyes. Their very retinas were partially drained of sensation, so that all the world appeared in black and white and grey. White the sky glimpsed overhead, grey the foliage that dappled it, black and grey the rocks distorted beneath their running feet.

Now through a maelstrom of dread and compulsion they saw the herders.

Like so many shadows, the herders stood against the last trunks of the banyan. They had strapped or tied themselves there with ropes. In the centre of them, also tied, stood Iccall the Singer. Now he sang! He sang in a peculiarly uncomfortable position, as if disfigured, as if his neck were broken, with his head hanging down and his eyes wildly fixed on the ground.

He sang with all his voice and all his heart's blood. The song came valiantly out, flinging itself against the might of the Black Mouth's song. It had a power of its own, a power to counteract the evil that would otherwise have drawn all the herders out towards the source of that other melody.

The herders listened with grim intensity to what he sang. Yet they were not idle. Lashed to the tree trunks, they cast their line nets before them, trapping the creatures that poured past them to the undeniable call.

Poyly and Gren could not make out the words of Iccall's song. They had not been trained to it. Its message was over-ridden by the emanations from the mighty Mouth.

Wildly, they fought against that emanation—wildly but fruitlessly. Despite themselves, they stumbled on. Fluttering things struck them on the cheeks. The whole black and white world heaved and crawled in one direction alone! Only the herders were immune while they listened to Iccall's song.

When Gren stumbled, galloping vegetable creatures hopped over him.

Then the jumpvils poured by, teeming through the jungle. Still desperately listening to Iccall's song, the herders snared them as they flocked past, staying them and slaying them in the middle of the melee.

Now Poyly and Gren were

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passing the last of the herders. They were moving faster as the dreadful melody grew stronger. Now the open lay ahead of them. Framed in a canopy of foreground branches stood the distant Black Mouth! A strangled cry—of what? admiration? horror?—was torn from their lips at that spectacle.

Terror now had form and legs and feelings, animated by the Black Mouth's song.

Towards it—they saw with their drained eyes—poured a stream of life, answering that accursed call, making as fast as it could go over the lava field, and up the volcanic slopes, and finally throwing itself in triumph over the lip and into that great aperture!

Another chilling detail struck their eyes. Over the edge of the Mouth appeared three great long chitinous fingers which waved and enticed and kept time to the fateful tune.

Both the humans screamed at the sight—yet they redoubled their speed, for the grey fingers beckoned them.

"O Poyly! O Gren! Gren!"

The cry came as a will o' the wisp. They did not pause. Gren managed a quick glance back, towards the jolting blacks and greys of the forest.

The last herder they had passed was Yattmur, the girl they had captured earlier. Regardless of Iccall's song, she threw off the thong that tied her to the tree. Her hair flying wild, she was plunging knee deep through the tide of life to join them. Her arms stretched out to him like those of a lover in a dream.

In the weird light her face was grey, but bravely she sang as she ran, a song like Iccall's to counteract that other evil melody.

Gren faced ahead again, looking towards the Black Mouth, and instantly forgot about her.

Now he had hold of Poyly's hand, but as they dashed past one of the outcrops of rock, Yattmur snatched his free hand.

For a saving moment they paid her attention. For a saving moment her brave song rose uppermost. Like a flash the morel seized a chance to break from the bondage.

"Swerve aside!" it twanged. "Swerve aside if you wish to live!"

A peculiar-looking copse of young shoots stood just by their path. Labouring hand in hand, they turned into its doubtful refuge. A random jumpvil hurtled in ahead of them, no doubt looking for a short cut in its stampede. They plunged into the grey gloom.

At once the monstrous tune lost much of its power. Yattmur fell against Gren's breast and sobbed —but all was still far from well.

Poyly touched one of the slender rods near her and screamed. A glutinous mass slid from the rod and over her hand. She waved

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it, hardly knowing what she did.

In despair they stared about, realizing they were in some kind of small enclosure. Their faulty vision had deceived them into entering a sort of trap. Already the jumpvil that had entered before them was inextricably caught by the mess extruded by the rods.

Yattmur grasped the truth first.

"A greenguts!" she cried. "We've been taken by a greenguts!"

"Cut our way out, quickly!" twanged the morel. "Your sword. Gren—fast, fast! It's closing on us."

The gap had shut behind them. They were totally enclosed. The 'ceiling' started to crumble and come down on them. The illusion of being in a copse faded. They were in a stomach.

Wrenching out their swords, they began to defend their lives. As the rods about them—rods growing so cunningly to suggest the trunks of saplings—buckled and telescoped, so the ceiling lowered, its folds oozing a suffocating jelly. Jumping high, Gren slashed mightily with his sword. A great split appeared in the greenguts' envelope.

The two girls helped him enlarge it. As the bag crumpled down, they managed to get their heads through the rent, thus avoiding certain death.

But now the older menace reasserted itself. Again the death wail from the Mouth seized them by their bloodstreams. They hacked with redoubled energy at the greenguts, to get loose and answer that chilling call.

They were free now but for their feet and ankles, which were stuck in the jelly. The greenguts was firmly anchored to a shoulder of rock so that it could not obey the call of the Black Mouth. It had collapsed entirely now, its solitary eye mournfully, helplessly, regarding their attempts to cut it to pieces.

"We must go!" Poyly cried, and at last managed to drag herself free. With her aid, Gren and Yattmur also broke away from the ruined creature. It closed its eye as they hurried off.

The delay had been longer than they knew. The ooze on their feet impeded them. They made their way over the lava as well as they could, still jostled by other creatures. Yattmur was too exhausted to sing again. Their wills were blotted out by the strength of the song.

At last they started to scramble up the slopes of the cone, surrounded by a galloping phantasmagoria of life. Above them waved the three long fingers in sinister invitation. A fourth finger appeared, and then a fifth, as if whatever it was in the volcano was working itself up to a climax.

Their eyes saw everything in a fuzz of grey as the melody swelled to an incredible intensity and

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their hearts laboured. The jumpvils really showed their paces, their long back legs enabling them to bound up the steeper slopes. They poured by, jumped onto the lip of the crater and then took their final leap to whatever lured them.

Now the humans were full of longing to meet the dread singer. . . . Panting, impeded by the mess about their feet, they scrambled across the last few yards. . . .

The dreadful melody ceased in mid-note. So unexpected was it, they fell flat on their faces. Exhaustion and relief washed over them. They lay with closed eyes, sobbing together. The melody had stopped, had stopped, entirely stopped.

Finally, after many pulses of his blood had gone by, Gren opened one eye.

The colours of the world were returning to normal again, white flooding with pink again, grey turning to blue and green and yellow, black dissolving into the sombre hues of the forest. By the same token, the overmastering desire in him turned to a revulsion for what they had been about to do.

The creatures round about that were too late to suffer the privilege of being swallowed by the Black Mouth evidently felt as he did. They turned and limped back towards the shelter of the forest, slowly at first and then faster, until their earlier stampede was reversed.

Soon the landscape was deserted.

Above the humans, five terrible long fingers came to rest precisely together on the lip of the Black Mouth. Then one by one they were withdrawn, leaving Gren with a vision of some unimaginable monster picking its teeth after an obscene repast.

"But for the greenguts we'd be dead by now," he said. "Are you all right, Poyly?"

"I'm alive," she said. Her face remained buried in her hands.

"For the gods' sake let's get back to the herders," he said.

"Wait!" Yattmur exclaimed. "You deceived Hutweer and the others into thinking you were great spirits. They will know now you are not great spirits. You deceived them. If you return, they will surely kill you."

Gren and Poyly looked at each other hopelessly. Despite the maneuvers of the morel, they had been pleased to be with a tribe again; the prospect of having to wander alone once more did not please them.

"Fear not," twanged the morel, reading their thought. "There are other tribes! What of these Fishers of which we heard? They sounded a more docile tribe than the herders. Ask Yattmur to lead us there."

"Are the Fishers far away?" Gren asked the girl herder.

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She smiled at him and pressed his hand. "It will be pleasant to take you to them. You can see where they live from here."

Yattmur pointed down the flanks of the volcano. In the opposite direction to that from which they had come, an opening was apparent at the base of the Black Mouth. From the opening came a swift broad stream.

"There runs Long Water," Yattmur said. "Do you see the strange bulb-shaped trees, three of them in number, growing on the bank? That is where the Fishers live."

She took the lead and they began sliding down towards the water, ever and anon glancing back fearfully over their shoulders to make sure that nothing came climbing out of the volcano after them.

VI

At the foot of the Black Mouth they came to the stream called Long Water. Once they had escaped from the shadow of the volcano, they lay in the warmth by the river bank. The waters ran dark and fast and smooth. On the opposite bank, the jungle began again, presenting a colonnade of trunks to the onlookers. On the near bank, lava checked that luxuriant growth for some yards.

Poyly dipped her hand into the water. So fast was it running that a bow wave formed against her palm. She splashed her forehead and rubbed her wet hand over her face.

"I am so tired," she said, "tired and sick. I want to go no further. All these parts here are so strange —not like the happy middle levels of jungle that I knew as a child. What happens to the world here? Does it go mad, or fall apart? Does it end here?"

"The world has to end somewhere," Yattmur said.

"Where it ends may be a good place for us to start it going again," twanged the morel.

"We shall feel better when we are rested," Gren said. "And then you must return to your herders, Yattmur."

As he turned to glance at her, a movement behind him caught his eye. He spun round, sword in hand, jumping up to confront three hairy men who seemed to have materialized out of the ground.

The girls jumped up too.

"Don't hurt them, Gren," Yattmur cried. "These are Fishers and they will be perfectly harmless."

And indeed the newcomers looked harmless. Though they wore knives in their belts, they carried no weapon in their hands. Their belts, plaited out of a jungle creeper, were their only adornments. On their three faces, their three expressions of mild stupidity were so similar as to represent almost a uniform.

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Gren took in one other noteworthy fact about them before they spoke: each had a long green tail, even as the herders had said.

"Do you bring us food for eating?" one of them asked.

"They think you are of my tribe, which is the only tribe they know," Yattmur said. Turning to the Fishers, she replied, "We have no food for you, O Fishers. We did not come to see you, only to travel."

"We have no fish for you," replied the first Fisher, and the three of them added almost in chorus, "Very soon the time for fishing will be here."

"We have nothing to exchange for food, but we should be glad of some fish to eat," Gren said.

"We have no fish for you. We have no fish for us. The time for fishing will soon be here," the Fishers said.

"Yes. I heard you the first time," Gren said. "What I mean is, will you give us fish when you have it?"

"Fish is fine to eat. There is fish for everyone when it comes."

"Good." Gren said, adding for the benefit of Poyly, Yattmur and the morel, "These seem very simple people."

"Simple or not, they didn't go chasing up the Black Mouth trying to kill themselves," the morel said. "We must ask them about that. How did they resist its beastly song? Let's go to their place, as they seem harmless enough."

"We will come with you," Gren told the Fishers.

"We are going to catch fish when the fish come soon. You people do not know how to catch."

"Then we will come and watch you catch fish."

The three Fishers looked at each other, a slight uneasiness ruffling the surface of their stupidity. Without saying a word more, they turned and walked away along the river bank. Given no option, the others followed.

"How much do you know of these people, Yattmur?" Poyly asked.

"Very little. We trade sometimes, as you know, but my people fear the Fishers because they are so strange, as if they were dead. They never leave this little strip of river bank."

"They can't be complete fools, for they know enough to eat well," Gren said, regarding the plump flanks of the men ahead.

"Look at the way they carry their tails!" Poyly exclaimed. "These are curious folk. I never saw the like."

"They would be simple for me to command," thought the morel.

As they walked, the Fishers reeled in their tails, holding them in neat coils in their right hands; the action, done so easily, was clearly automatic. For the first time, the others saw that these tails were extraordinarily long; in fact, the ends of them were not

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visible. Where they joined the Fishers' bodies, a sort of soft green pad formed at the base of their spines.

Suddenly and in unison the Fishers stopped and turned.

"You can come no further now," they said. "Stop here and soon we will bring you fish."

"Why can't we come any further?" Gren asked.

One of the Fishers laughed unexpectedly.

"Because you have no tail! Now wait here and soon we will bring you fish." And he walked on with his companions, not even bothering to look back and see if his order was being obeyed.

"These are curious folk," Poyly said again. "I don't like them, Gren. They are not like people at all. Let us leave them; we can easily find our own food."

"Nonsense! They may be very useful to us," twanged the morel. "You see they have a boat of some sort down there."

Further down the bank, several of the people with long green tails were working. They laboured under the trees, dragging what looked like some sort of a green net into their boat. This boat rode tight in against the near bank, plunging occasionally in the stiff current. A heavy barge-like affair, it boasted no oars as far as could be seen from this distance.

Now the first three Fishers rejoined the main party, helping them with the net. Poyly's gaze wandered from them to the three trees in the shade of which they all worked.

Certainly the trees were remarkable. Their aspect made her even more uneasy.

Standing apart from all other vegetation, they bore a resemblance to giant pineapples. A collar of spiny leaves projected outwards direct from the ground, protecting the central fleshy trunk, which in each of the three cases was swollen into a massive knobbly ovoid. From the knobs of the ovoid sprouted long trailers; from the top of the ovoid sprouted more leaves, spiney and sharp, extending some two hundred feet into the air.

"Poyly, let us go and look more closely at those trees," the morel twanged urgently. "Gren and Yattmur will wait here and watch us."

"I do not like these people or this place, Morel," Poyly said. "And I will not leave Gren here with this woman, do what you will."

"I shall not touch your mate," Yattmur said indignantly.

Poyly staggered forward under a sudden compulsion from the morel. She looked appealingly at Gren; but Gren was tired and pretended not to look. Reluctantly she moved forward and soon was under the bloated trees. They towered stiffly above her, casting a spiked shade.

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The morel seemed not to feel their menace.

"Just as I had assumed!" it exclaimed after a long inspection. "Here is where the tails of our Fishers end. They are joined to the trees—our simple friends belong to the trees."

"Humans do not grow from trees, morel. Did you not know—" She paused, for a hand had fallen on her shoulder.

She turned. One of the Fishers confronted her, looking her closely in the face with his blank eyes.

"You must not come under the trees," he said. "Their shade is sacred. We said you must not come under our trees. I will take you back to your friends who have not come with you."

Poyly's eye travelled down his tail. Even as the morel had claimed, it joined onto the swelling of the nearest spikey tree. She felt a shiver of dread and moved away from him.

"Obey him!" twanged the morel. "There is evil here, Poyly. We must fight it. Let him walk with us back to the others and then we will capture him and ask him a few questions."

This will cause trouble, she thought, but at once the morel filled her mind saying, "We need these people and perhaps we need their boat."

So she yielded to the Fisher as he grasped her arm and walked her slowly back to Gren and Yattmur, who watched this performance intently. As they went, the Fisher solemnly payed out his tail.

"Now!" cried the morel, when they reached the others.

Forced on by his will, Poyly flung herself on the Fisher's back. The move was so sudden that he staggered and fell forward.

"Help me!," Poyly called. Before she had spoken, Gren was on his feet with his knife ready. And at the same moment a cry came from all the other Fishers. They dropped their great net and began to run towards Gren and his party.

"Quickly, Gren, cut this creature's tail off," Poyly said, prompted by the morel, as she struggled to keep her opponent down.

Without questioning her, for the morel's orders were in his mind too, Gren reached forward and slashed once.

The green tail was severed a foot from the Fisher's rump. At once the man lay still at their feet. The tail that had been attached to him commenced a writhing motion, lashing the ground like an injured snake. Gren slashed at it again. Leaking sap, it curled up and went looping back to the tree. As if this were a signal, the other Fishers ceased their advance; halting en masse, they turned and went indifferently back to loading their net into the boat.

"Praise the gods for that!" Yattmur exclaimed. "What is this trouble you bring us, Poyly?"

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"All these Fishers are not like us. They are attached to the three trees."

"They are slaves of the trees," twanged the morel. "It is disgusting. The trailers from the trees grow into their backbones and compel them to guard them. Look at this poor wretch grovelling here —a slave!"

"Is it worse than what you do with us, morel?" Poyly asked. "Is it any different? Why don't you let us go?"

"I help you—I save your lives. I shall never leave you. Now, attend to this poor Fisher."

The poor Fisher was attending to himself, sitting up and examining a knee that had been grazed in his fall onto the rock. He gazed at them with an anxiety that still did not remove the simplicity from his countenance.

"You can get up," Gren told him gently, extending his hand to help the fellow to his feet. "You're shaking. We won't hurt you if you answer our questions."

The Fisher broke in a torrent of words, most of it incomprehensible.

"Speak slowly. You're talking about the trees? What are you saying?"

"Please. . . . The Tummy-trees, yes. I and them all one part, all tummy or tummy-hands. Tummy-head to think for me where I serve Tummy-trees. You kill my tummy-cord, I feel no good in my veins, no good sap. You wild lost people with no Tummy-tree, not have the sap to see what I say . . ."

"Stop it! Talk sense, you great tummy! You're a human like me. You call those big swollen plants Tummy-trees? And you have to serve them? When did you get caught? How long ago?"

The Fisher put his hand to the height of his knee, rolled his head stupidly and burst into speech again.

"So-high the Tummy-trees take us, cuddle, bed, save snugly like mothers. Babies go in the soft folds, just legs to see, keep on sucking at the tummy, get put on a tummy-cord to walk. Please you let me go back, try find a new tummy-cord or I'm a poor baby too without one."

Poyly, Gren and Yattmur stared at him as he chattered, not taking in half he said.

"He's horrible," Yattmur whispered. "He talked more sense with his tail uncut."

"We've set you free—we'll set all your friends free," Gren said. "We'll take you all away from these filthy Tummy-trees. You'll be free, free to work with us and start a new life."

"No, no, please. . . . Tummy-trees grow us like flowers! We have no want be wild men like you, no lovely Tummy-trees—"

"Shut up about the trees!" Gren raised his hand and at once the

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other fell silent, biting his lips. "Now, tell us quickly, what is this fishing business? When does it start? Soon?"

"Soon now, so soon, please," the Fisher said, trying to catch Gren's hand in entreaty. "Most times, no fishy fish swim in Long Water, cut too sharply on out the hole of Black Mouth, so no fish swim. And if no fish means no fishing. Then the Black Mouth sing to all things to be a meal for him in his mouth, and so Tummy-trees make us big mummy noise, not let us be any meal in his mouth. Then short time Mouth make rest, no sing, no eat, no noise. Then Mouth drop away what he eat not need not eat not have, drop away in Long Water under his self. Then up come big fish big hunger big eat all drop-away pieces, we quick Tummy-men Fishers go out catch big fish big hunger in big net, feed big glad Tummy-tree, feed Fishers, all feed—"

"All right, that'll do," Gren said, and the Fisher subsided wretchedly. As they began an excited discussion, he sank down to the ground, holding his head dolorously in his hands.

With the morel, Gren and Poyly came to a plan of action.

"We can save them all," Gren said.

"They don't want to be saved," Yattmur said. "They are too foul to want to be saved."

While they were talking, the Long Water changed colour. A myriad bits and pieces erupted onto its surface, dappling it as they were swept along.

"The remains of the Mouth's feast!" Gren exclaimed. "Come on, before the boat casts off and the Fishers start to fish. Out with your knives."

Impelled by the morel, he bounded off, Poyly and Yattmur following. Only the latter cast a backward glance at the Fisher. He was rolling on the ground in a bout of misery, indifferent to everything but his own suffering.

The big group of Fishers had by now loaded their net into the boat. On seeing the refuse in the stream they gave a cheer and climbed into the vessel, each paying out his tail over the stern as he went. The last one was scrambling aboard as Gren and the women rushed up.

"Jump for it!" Gren shouted, and the three of them jumped, landing on the crude and creaking deck close together. In unison, the nearer Fishers turned to face them.

Unwieldy though it was, built under the direction of the pseudo-aware Tummy-trees, the boat was made to serve a particular purpose: to catch the big scavenger fish of Long Water. It boasted neither oars nor sail, since its only function was to drag a heavy net across the stream from one bank

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to the other. Accordingly, a stoutly woven rope had been stretched across the water and anchored to trees on either side. To this rope the boat was loosely secured through a series of eyes, thus preventing its being swept away on the flood. It was maneuvered across the river by simple brute force, half the Fishers pulling on the guide rope while the others lowered the net into place. So it had been from dimmest times.

Routine governed the Fishers' lives. When the three intruders landed among them, neither they nor the Tummy-trees knew clearly what action to take. Divided in purpose, the Fishers were made half to continue hauling the boat into mid-stream and half to defend their position.

With a disconcerting unison, the defence force rushed forward at Gren and the girls.

Yattmur glanced over her shoulder. It was too late to jump ashore again. She wrenched up her knife. As the Fishers fell at them, she plunged it into the stomach of the nearest man. He stumbled, but others bore her down. Her knife went skidding over the deck and her hands were pinned before she could draw her sword.

Poyly and Gren were similarly attacked. Though they fought desperately, they too were borne down.

Evidently the Fishers and their pot-bellied masters ashore had not thought to use knives until they saw Yattmur's. Now—as one man—they all produced knives.

Through Gren's brain, amid his panic and fury, seared the angry jangle of the morel's thought.

"You brainless tarsiers! Waste no time on these dolls of men! Cut their umbilical cords, their tails, their tails, you fools! Hack their tails off and they'll not harm you!"

Cursing, ramming a knee into a groin and knuckles into an attacker's face, Gren knocked aside a down-curving knife and twisted over onto his knees. Impelled by the morel, he grasped another Fisher by the neck, wrenching it savagely and then flinging the man aside. Now his way was clear. With a leap he was up on the stern.

The green tails lay there, thirty of them together, stretching over to the shore.

Gren let out a shout of triumph. Then he brought his blade down.

Half a dozen slashes in cold anger and the thing was done!

The boat rocked violently. The Fishers jerked and fell. All their activity stopped. They moaned and cried, picking themselves up to stand helplessly together in a knot, their severed tails dangling. Shorn of its motive power, the boat rested in mid-stream.

"You see," remarked the morel, "The fight is over."

Gasping, Poyly stood up.

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A flailing movement caught her eye. Her sense of relief died in her as she looked at the bank they had left. A low cry of horror was wrenched from her lips. Gren and Yattmur turned to stare where she did. They stood transfixed, their knives still grasped in their hands.

"Get down!" Poyly shouted.

Scintillant leaves like toothed swords whirled above them. The three Tummy-trees heaved in wrath. Bereft of their willing slaves, they were lashing the tall leaves that formed their poll into action. Their whole bulk trembled as the dark green blades flashed above the vessel.

As Poyly flung herself flat, the first blade struck, throwing a great raw weal across the rough wood of the deck. Splinters flew. A second and a third blow fell. Such a terrible bombardment, she knew, would kill them all in no time.

The unnatural anger of these trees was fearful to see. Poyly did not let it paralyze her. As Gren and Yattmur crouched under the frail shelter of the stern, she jumped up. Without needing the morel to guide her, she leant over the side and hacked at the tough fibres that kept the boat square across the river.

Armoured leaves flayed near her. The Fishers were struck once and then again. Parabolas of blood patterned the deck. Crying, the poor creatures tumbled together while their limbs bled and they staggered from the centre of the deck. Still the trees struck out mercilessly.

Tough though the securing rope was, it parted at last under Poyly's attack. She gave a shout of triumph as the boat freed itself and swayed round under the force of the water.

She was still climbing to cover as the next leaf crashed down. The spines along one fleshy edge of it raked her with full force across the chest.

"Poyly!" Gren and Yattmur cried with one voice, springing up.

They never reached her. The blow caught her off balance. She doubled up as the blood came weeping from her wound. As her knees buckled she fell backwards. Momentarily her eyes caught Gren's in tender appeal, and then she disappeared over the side and hit the waters.

They rushed to the side and peered down. An extra turbidity marked where she had sunk. One hand appeared on the surface, its fingers outspread, severed from its arm. It vanished at once in a welter of fish bodies and there was no more sign of Poyly.

Falling onto the deck, beating his fists on it in sorrow, Gren cried to the morel.

"Could you not have saved her, you miserable fungus, you useless growth? Could you not have done something? What did you bring her but trouble?"

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A long silence followed. Gren called at it again—in grief and hatred. At length the morel spoke in a small voice.

"Half of me is dead."

VII

By this time the boat had begun to whirl away down the flood. Already they were safe from the Tummy-trees, which fell rapidly behind, their murderous polls still beating the water into lines of spray.

Seeing that they were being carried off, the Fishers began a chorus of groans. Yattmur raged at them, parading before them with her sword out.

"You Tummy-belly men! You lickers of sap! You long-tailed sons of swollen plants! Cease your noise! Someone real has died and you shall mourn her or I'll throw you all overboard with my own two hands!"

At that the Fishers fell into abject silence. Grouped humbly together, they comforted each other and licked each other's wounds. Running over to Gren, Yattmur put her arm round him and pressed her cheek against his. Only for a moment did he try to resist her.

"Don't mourn too much for Poyly. She was fine in life—and all of us fall to the green at some time or another. I am here now, and I will be your mate."

"You want to get back to your tribe, to the herders."

"Ha! They lie far behind us. How shall I get back? Stand up and see how fast we are being swept along! I can hardly see the Black Mouth—it's no bigger than one of my nipples. We are in danger, O Gren. Rouse yourself! Ask your magical friend the morel where we are going."

"I don't care what happens to us now."

"Look Gren—"

A shout rose from the Fishers. They showed a sort of apathetic interest, which was enough to pull Yattmur and Gren up at once. The creatures were pointing ahead.

Their boat was rapidly being swept towards another. More than one Fishers' colony grew by the banks of the Long Water. Another loomed ahead, two bulging Tummy-trees marking its position. This colony's net was out across the stream, its boat resting against the far bank, full of Fishers. Their tails hung over the river along the top of the net.

"We're going to hit them," Gren said.

"No, we shall miss their boat. Perhaps their net will stop us. Then we can get safely ashore."

"Look at these fools climbing onto the sides of the boat. They'll be jerked overboard." He called to the Fishers in question. "Hey, you Short-tails! Get down there."

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His cry was drowned by their shouts and the roar of the water. Next moment they struck the net that stretched across their path.

The cumbersome boat squealed and lurched as if it were human. Several Fishers were flung down into the water by the impact. One of them managed to jump the narrowing distance into the other boat. The two vessels struck glancingly, cannoned off each other—and then the securing rope across the river broke.

They whirled free again, to go racing on down the flood. The other boat, being already against the bank, stayed there, bumping uncomfortably. Many of its crew were scampering about the bank; some had been flung into the stream, some had had their tails lopped off. But their misadventures remained hidden for ever more as Gren's boat swept round a grand curve and jungle closed in on both sides.

"Now what do we do?" Yattmur asked, trembling.

Gren shrugged his shoulders. He had no ideas. The world had revealed itself as too big and too terrible for him.

"Wake up, morel," he said. "What happens to us now?"

For answer the morel started turning his mind upside down. Dizzied, Gren sat down heavily. Yattmur clasped his hands while phantoms of memory and thought fluttered before his mental gaze. The morel was studying navigation.

Finally it said, "We need to steer this boat to get it to obey us. But there is nothing to steer it with. We must wait and see what happens."

It was an admission of defeat. Gren sat on the deck with an arm round Yattmur, properly indifferent to everything external. His thoughts went back to his early days, when he and Poyly were careless children in the tribe of Lily-yo. Life had been so easy, so sweet then, and little had they realized it! Why, it had even been warmer; the sun had shone almost directly overhead.

He opened one eye. The sun was quite far down in the sky.

"I'm cold," he said.

"Huddle against me," Yattmur coaxed.

Some freshly pulled leaves lay near them; perhaps they had been plucked to wrap the Fishers' expected catch of fish in. Yattmur pulled them over Gren and lay close against him.

He relaxed in her warmth. Instinctively he began to explore her body as interest in her awoke. She felt his interest and pressed ardently against him. Her hands too began a journey of exploration. Lost in delight of each other they forgot the world. When he took her, she was also taking him.

Even the morel was soothed by the pleasure of their actions under

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the warm leaves. The boat sped on down the river, occasionally bumping a bank, but never ceasing its progress.

After a while, it joined a much wider river and spun hopelessly in an eddy for some time, making them all dizzy. One of the wounded Fishers died here; he was thrown overboard; this might have been a signal, for at once the boat was released from the eddy and floated off again on the broad bosom of the waters. Now the river was very broad and widening still further, so that in time they could see neither shore.

For the humans, especially Gren to whom the idea of long empty distances was foreign, it was an unknown world. They stared out at the expanse only to turn away shivering and hide their eyes. Everywhere was motion—and not only beneath them in the restless water. A cool wind had sprung up, a wind that would have lost its way in the measureless miles of the forest but was here master of all it passed over. It scuffed the water with its invisible footsteps, it jostled the boat and made it creak, it splashed spray in the troubled faces of the Fishers, it ruffled their hair and blew it across their ears. More seriously, it chilled their skins and drew a gauze of cloud over the sky.

Nineteen Fishers remained in the boat, six of them suffering badly from the attack of the Tummy-trees. They made no attempt to approach Gren and Yattmur at first, lying together like a living monument to despair. First one and then another of the wounded died and was cast overboard. So they were carried out into the ocean.

The great width of the river prevented them from being attacked by the giant seaweeds which fringed the coasts. Nothing, indeed, marked their transition from river to estuary or from estuary to sea; the broad brown roll of fresh water continued far into the surrounding salt waves.

Gradually the brown faded into green and blue depths, the wind stiffened, taking them in a different direction, parallel with the coast. The mighty forest looked no bigger than a leaf.

One of the Fishers, urged by his companions, came humbly over to Gren and Yattmur where they lay resting among the leaves. He bowed to them.

"O great herders, hear us speak when we speak if you let me start talking," he said.

Gren said sharply, "We will do you no harm. We are in trouble just as you are. Can't you understand that? We meant to help you, and that we shall do if the world turns dry again. But try to gather your thoughts together so that you talk sense. What do you want?"

The man bowed low. Behind him, his companions bowed low in heart-sick imitation.

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"Great herder, we see you since you come. We clever Tummy-tree chaps are seeing your size. So we know you will soon love to kill us when you jump up from playing the sandwich game along with your lady. We clever chaps are not fools, and not fools are clever to make glad dying for you. All the same sadness makes us not clever to die with no feeding. All we poor sad clever Tummy-men have no feeding and pray you give us feeding because we have no mummy Tummy-feeding—"

Gren gestured impatiently.

"We've no food either," he said. "We are humans like you. We too must fend for ourselves."

"Alas, we did not dare to have any hopes you would share your food with us, for your food is sacred and you wish to see us starve. We are glad, great herder, that you make us starve if our dying makes you have a laugh and a gay song and another sandwich game. We do not need food to die with . . ."

"I really will kill these creatures," Gren said savagely. "Morel, what do we do with them? You got us into this trouble. Help us get out of it."

"Make them throw their net over the side and catch fish," twanged the morel.

"Good!" Gren said. He jumped up, pulling Yattmur with him, and began to shout orders at the Fishers.

Miserably, incompetently, fawningly, they arranged their net and cast it over the side of the vessel. The sea here teemed with life. No sooner was the net down than something big tugged at it—tugged and began unfalteringly to climb it.

The boat listed over to that side. With a cry, the Fishers fell away as a great pair of claws rattled over the gunwales. Gren was beneath them. Without thought, he pulled out his knife and smote.

A lobster head bigger than his own loomed up before him. An eyestalk went flying—and another, as he smote again.

Soundlessly the marine monster released its hold and fell back into the depths, leaving a frightened band of Fishers moaning in the scuppers. Almost as frightened himself—for he sensed the morel's fear in his mind—Gren rounded on them, kicking and shouting.

"Get up, you flabby tummy-bellies! Would you lie there and die? Well I won't let you. Get up and haul the net in again before we get any more monsters in on us. Come on, move! Get this net in!"

"O great herder, you may throw us to the brutes of the wet world and we will not complain. We may not complain! You see we praise you even when you fetch up the brutes of the wet world upon us and we do not complain, so be merciful—"

"Merciful! I'll flay you alive if

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you don't get that net in at once. Move!" he yelled, and they moved.

The line came over the side laden with struggling creatures that splashed and flapped about their ankles.

"Wonderful!" Yattmur cried, squeezing Gren. "I am so hungry. Now we shall live! Soon there will be an end to this Long Water, I know."

But the boat drifted as it would. They went to sleep once more and then a second time, and the weather grew no warmer—and then they woke to find the deck still beneath them.

Gren opened his eyes. A stretch of sand and bushes met his gaze. He and Yattmur were alone in the boat.

"Morel!" he cried, leaping to his feet. "You never sleep—why did you not wake me and tell us that the water had stopped? And the Fishers have escaped!"

He looked round at the ocean that had brought them here. Yattmur stood up silently, stretching and regarding with wonder a great peak that rose from the nearby bushes.

The morel made something like a ghostly chuckle in Gren's mind. "The Fishers will not get far—let them find out the dangers for us first. I let you and Yattmur sleep on to be fresh. You will need all your energy. This is where we build our new kingdom, my friend!"

VIII

Through the rivers of the air sailed a big speedseed bird. Taking a steady course, it occasionally changed direction by a degree or so without interrupting the pulse of its flight. High over the ocean it soared, its wooden wings creaking like a fully rigged sailing ship.

Standing on a strip of sand far below, two humans heard its noise and looked up.

The speedseed bird had sighted the land. Slowing, it circled and began to lose height.

A choice of cover presented itself to the humans—they could hide under the crude boat which had just brought them to this shore, or they could dive into the head of jungle that curled over the low forehead of the beach below towering cliffs. The boat was flimsy shelter from a large bird; together, man and woman dived into the green mass of foliage.

Now the speedseed was plunging steeply. Its wings would not retract. Stiffly outspread, they jarred and vibrated through the air as momentum increased.

Crouching under a giant leaf, the two humans, one male and one female, peered up at the vegetable creature that now seemed to be diving straight at them. The vibratory racket of its wings filled the heavens.

"Has it seen us, Gren?" the woman Yattmur asked anxiously.

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For answer Gren merely clutched her arm tightly, staring up with slitted eyes. Because he was both frightened and angry, he did not trust himself to speak.

Still the clumsy bird dived, and now it became obvious it could not straighten out in time to avoid hitting the land. Down it came, its shadow swept black over the bush, the leaves stirred as it shot behind a nearby tree—and silence fell. No sound of impact reached the humans, though the bird must have hit the ground no more than fifty yards from them.

"Like a ghost!" Gren said. "Let's go and see what happened to it."

Yattmur clung to him to hold him back.

"This is an unknown place, full of unknown perils," she said. "Let us not seek trouble when trouble is ready enough to seek us. You forget we know nothing of where we are. First we must find what kind of place it is, and if we can live here."

"I would rather find trouble than let it find me," Gren said. "But perhaps you are right, Yattmur. My bones tell me that this is not a good place. What has happened to the tummy-belly men that came ashore before us?"

They crawled out of the foliage and started to walk slowly along the beach, looking watchfully about them. Their crew on the boat had consisted of twenty of the pitiful and cretinous creatures—four of them injured. Yattmur and Gren watched for signs of these strange companions, moving between the flatness of the sea and the steepness of the great cliffs.

The signs they looked for were soon found.

"Here!" said Gren, running along the strand.

Scuffed footprints marked the way the tummy-belly men had taken after landing. Many of the prints were imprecise and pointed this way and that; handprints also were not uncommon, marking where the creatures had stumbled into one another and fallen. For Gren the marks were eloquent, clearly betraying the lumpish and uncertain way in which the tummy-bellies had progressed. They led after a short distance into the narrow belt of trees with leathery and sad leaves that stood between beach and cliff. As Gren and Yattmur followed the prints into the gloom, a low sound made them stop. Moans came from near at hand.

Drawing out his knife, Gren called, "Whoever you are, come out before I haul you out!"

The moans redoubled, a low threnody in which babbled words were distinguishable.

"It's a tummy-belly!" Yattmur exclaimed. Her eyes had adjusted to the shade, and she ran forward and knelt on the sandy ground among the sharp grasses.

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A tummy-belly lay there with three of his companions huddled against him. He shuddered violently away, half rolling over, as Yattmur appeared.

"I shan't hurt you," Yattmur said. "We were searching to find where you had gone."

"It is too late, for our hearts are broken by your not coming before," the man cried, tears rolling down his cheeks. Like his companions, he was so completely covered with long dark hair that it might almost be said to form a pelt. Dried blood from a long scratch across one shoulder had matted his hair at that point, but Yattmur could see the wound was only superficial.

"It's a good thing we found you," he said. "There's nothing much wrong with you. You must all get up now and return to the boat."

At this the injured tummy-belly burst into fresh complaint and his fellows joined in the chorus.

"O great herders, the sight of you adds to our miseries. How very much we rejoice to see you again, though we know you will kill us, poor helpless lovable tummy-fellows that we are."

"We are, we are, we are, and though our love is loving you, you cannot love us, for we are only miserable dirt and you are cruel murderers who are cruel to dirt."

"You will kill us though we are dying! O how we admire you, you brave tail-less heroes!"

"Stop this filthy babbling," Gren ordered. "We are not murderers and we have never desired to harm you."

"O we thought you were dead in the boat when the watery world turned to solid, so we crept away in good grief, crept away on all our feet because your snores were loud. Now you have caught us again and because you do not snore we know you will kill us!"

Gren slapped the nearest creature lightly on his cheek—he forthwith writhed as if in mortal agony.

"Be silent, blubbering fools!" Gren shouted. "We shall not hurt you if you trust us. Stand up and tell us where the rest of your number is."

His order only brought forth fresh lamentation.

"You can see we four sad sufferers are fatally dying of the death that comes to all green and pink things, so you tell us to stand up, because to make any standing position will kill us badly, so that you kick us when our souls are gone and we can only be dead at you and not crying with our harmless mouths. O we fall down from our lying flat at such a sly good idea, great herder!"

As they cried out, they tried blindly to grasp Yattmur and Gren's ankles and kiss their feet, causing the two humans to skip about in an undignified way to avoid this embrace.

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"There's very little wrong with the foolish creatures," said Yattmur, who had been trying to examine them during this orgy of lamentation. "They are scratched and bruised, nothing more."

"I'll soon heal them," Gren said. His ankle had been caught; he kicked out into a podgy face. Impelled by loathing, he grasped one of the other prone tummy-bellies and dragged the creature to its feet by force.

"How wonderfully strong you are, master," it groaned, trying at once to kiss and bite his hands. "Your muscles and your cruelty are huge to poor little dying chaps like us whose blood is going bad inside them because of bad things and other bad things, alas!"

"I'll push your teeth down your throat if you don't keep quiet," Gren promised.

With Yattmur's help, he got the other three tummy-bellies to their feet; as she had said, there was little wrong with them apart from self-pity. Silencing them, he asked them whither their sixteen companions had gone.

"O wonderful no-tail, you spare this poor tiny number four to enjoy killing the big number sixteen. What self-sacrifice you sacrifice! We happily tell you of the happiness we feel in telling you which way went our jolly sad sixteen number, so we can be spared to go on living and enjoying your smacks and blows and cruel kicks in the noses of our tender face. The sixteen number laid us down here to die in peace before they ran on that way for you to catch them and play killing."

And they pointed dejectedly along the shore.

"Stay here and keep quiet," Gren ordered. "We will come back for you."

"We will wait in fear even if we die first."

"See you do."

Gren and Yattmur set off along the beach, climbing now over rocks that pricked the soles of their feet. Silence descended; even the ocean made hardly a murmur as it nuzzled restlessly against the land; and they felt again a huge unease, as if a million eyes watched them unseen.

For the first time they properly surveyed their surroundings. Creatures of the jungles, they would never face anything more alien than the sea; yet the land here held a strangeness. It was not simply that the trees—with leathery leaves that seemed suitable for the colder climate—were of an unknown variety; nor that behind the trees there rose a steep cliff, so steep, so grey, so pitted, rising to a spire so far above their heads, that it dwarfed everything and seemed to cast a gloom over the whole scene.

Beside all this element of visual strangeness, another note of menace obtruded, one to which they

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could give no name, but which seemed all the more obtrusive after their semi-farcical brush with the tummy-bellies. Perhaps the deep silence of the beach contributed to the feeling. It was as though they crawled over the face of a sleeping giant.

Taking a nervous peck of a glance across her shoulder, Yattmur looked up towards the towering cliff again. Light wisps of cloud scudding across the sky made that great wall look as if it were toppling.

With a scream, Yattmur fell on her face and covered her eyes.

"The mighty cliffs are crashing down on us!" she cried, pulling Gren down with her.

He looked up once. The illusion caught him too: that grand and high tower was coming grandly down on top of them! Together they squeezed their soft bodies among the hard rock, seeking safety by pressing their faces into damp shingley sand. They were creatures who belonged to the jungles of this hothouse world; so many things here were alien to them, they could respond only with fear.

Instinctively Gren called in his mind:

"Morel, save us! We trusted you and you brought us to this dreadful place. Now you must get us away from it, quickly before the cliff comes down on us."

"If you die, I die," said the morel, sending its twanging harmonics through Gren's head. It added more helpfully, "The clouds move; the cliff does not."

A moment or two passed—an interval of waiting filled with the dirge of the ocean—before Gren dared to test the truth of this observation. At length, finding that no rocks cascaded down onto his naked body, he peered up. Feeling him move, Yattmur whimpered.

Still the cliff seemed to fall. He braced himself to look at it more thoroughly.

The cliff appeared to be sailing out of the heavens onto him, yet at last he assured himself that it did not move. He dared to look away from its pitted face and nudge Yattmur.

"The cliff is not harming us yet," he said. "We can go on."

She raised a woebegone face, its cheeks patterned redly where they had pressed against the tiny stones of the shore, some of which still clung there.

"It is a magic cliff. It always falls yet it never falls," she said at last, after regarding the rock carefully. "I don't like it. It has eyes to watch us."

They scrambled on, Yattmur looking nervously up from time to time. Clouds were gathering, their shadows lending the place a sinister air.

The shore curved sharply and continuously, its sands often buried under great masses of rock on

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which the jungle encroached at one end and the sea at the other. Over these masses they had laboriously to climb, by instinct moving as quietly as possible.

"We shall soon be back where we started from," Gren said, looking back and finding that their boat was now concealed behind the central cliff.

"Correct," twanged the morel. "We are on a small island, Gren."

"We can't live here then, morel?"

"I think not."

"How do we get away?"

"As we arrived—in the boat. Some of these giant leaves would serve us as sails."

"We hate the boat, morel, and the watery world."

"But you prefer them to death. How can we live here, Gren? It is merely a great round tower of rock skirted by a strip of sand."

Gren lapsed into confused thought without reporting this unspoken conversation to Yattmur. The wise thing, he concluded, would be to postpone a decision until they had found the rest of the tummy-belly men.

He became aware of Yattmur looking more and more frequently over her shoulder at the high tower of rock. Bursting with nerves, he said, "What's the matter with you? Look where you are going or you will break your neck."

She took his hand.

"Hush! It will hear you," she said. "This terrible big tower of cliff has a million eyes that watch us all the time."

As he began to turn his head she seized his face, pulling him down with her behind a protruding rock.

"Don't let it see that we know," she whispered. "Peep at it from here."

So he did, his mouth dry, his gaze going over that large and watchful surface of grey. Cloud had obscured the sun, rendering the rock in the dull light more forbidding than ever. Already he had noticed that it was pitted; now he saw how evenly spaced those pits were, how much they resembled sockets, how uncannily they seemed to stare down at him from the rock face.

"You see!" Yattmur said. "What terrible thing broods over this place? What life have we seen since we came here? Nothing moving in the trees, nothing scampering on the beach, nothing climbing on that rock face. Only *we* are alive, and for how much longer will that be?"

Even as she moaned, something moved on the tower of rock. The bleak eyes—now there was no mistaking them—rolled; countless numbers of them rolled in unison, and turned in a new direction as if to stare at something out to sea.

Compelled by the intensity of that stone gaze, Gren and Yattmur also turned. From where they

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crouched, only a section of the sea was visible, framed among the nearby broken rock lying on the beach. Yet it was view enough for them to observe, far out on the grey waters, a commotion marking where a large swimming thing laboured towards the very beach on which they hid.

"O spirits! How do we run back to the boat?" Yattmur asked.

"Stay still. It cannot have seen us: we are hidden from it."

"The magic tower with eyes is calling it to come and devour us!"

"Nonsense," said Gren, speaking also to his own secret fears.

Hypnotized, they watched the thing. Spray made it difficult to distinguish its shape. Only two great flippers that flailed the water like crazy paddlewheels could be seen clearly, at intervals. Occasionally they thought they could see a head poised as though straining towards the shore; but visibility was still failing.

Suddenly the broad sheet of sea puckered. A rain curtain blew in from the heavy skies, cutting off sight of the sea creature and sousing everything with cold stinging droplets.

Obeying a common impulse, Gren and Yattmur dived for the trees, to stand dripping against one of the trunks. The rain redoubled its strength. They could hardly see as far as the tattered frill of whiteness that marked the margin of the sea.

From the darkness and wetness came a forlorn chord, a warning note as if the world were falling away. The sea creature was signalling for guidance. Almost at once it received answer. The island or the rock tower itself gave voice in return.

One hollow jarring note was wrenched from its very foundations. Not that it was a loud note; but it filled all things, spilling down onto land and sea like the rain itself, as though every decibel was a drop that had to make itself individually felt. Horribly shaken by the sound, Yattmur clung to Gren and cried.

Above her weeping, above the noise of the rain and sea, above the reverberations of the voice of the tower, another voice rose in a ragged intensity of fright and then died. It was a composite voice containing elements of supplication and reproach, and Gren recognized it.

"The missing tummy-belly men!" he exclaimed. "They must be near at hand."

He looked hopelessly about, dashing rain from his eyes as he did so. The great leathery leaves sagged and sprang up again under varying loads of water. Nothing but forest could be seen, forest bowing in submission to the downpour. The sphere of their world had shrunk under the force of a tropical storm. Gren did not move; the tummy-bellies would

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have to wait till the rain abated. He stood where he was with an arm round Yattmur. There are times when a man must endure mutely like a tree.

Summoning patience, they peered out towards the sea.

Suddenly the greyness before them was broken in a flurry of waves.

"It's come for us!" Yattmur screamed.

The vast marine creature had entered shallow water and was heaving itself from the sea. They saw the rain sizzling in cataracts off a great flat head as the gigantic body heaved itself up. A mouth as narrow and heavy as an open grave creaked open—and Yattmur broke from Gren's arms and ran off along the beach in the direction from which they had come, shrieking with fright.

"Yattmur!" Instantly his muscles strained to follow her. The full dead weight of the morel's will fought unexpectedly against him. Gren stayed locked, momentarily immobile in a sprinter's stance. Caught off balance, he fell sideways into the streaming sand.

"Stay where you are," twanged the morel. "Since the creature is obviously not after us, we must stay to see what it is doing. It will do us no harm if you keep quiet."

Through the violence of the rain came an irregular and protracted groaning. The vast creature was out of breath. Laboriously it dragged itself up the shelving beach only some sixty yards from where Gren lay. The rain folded it in grey curtains, so that with its anguished breathing and pained movements it took on the aspect, lumbering there in surroundings as unlikely as itself, of a grotesque symbol of pain conjured in a dream.

Its head became hidden from them by the trees. Only its body could be seen, moved forward by jerks from the unwielding flippers, before that too was concealed. The tail slithered up the beach; then it also was swallowed by the jungle.

"Go and see where it has gone," ordered the morel.

"No," said Gren. He knelt, and his body ran with brown mud where rain and sand mingled.

"Go!" twanged the morel. Always at the back of its mind lay its basic purpose, to propagate as widely as possible. Although this human had at first seemed by reason of its intelligence to hold promise as a useful host, it had hardly come up to expectations; whereas a brute of mindless power such as they had just seen . . . The morel propelled Gren forward.

Moving by the fringe of the trees, they came to the tracks made by the creature. It had churned up a trench as deep as a man's height in its progress.

To observe in safety, Gren dropped onto hands and knees, his

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blood racing thunderously. The creature could be only a short distance away; a distinct rotten briney smell hung in the air. Very cautiously, he peered round a bole of a tree, following the deep tracks with his eye.

Here the strip of jungle stopped unexpectedly, to resume some paces further along the shore. In the gap, the sand led right to the base of the rock tower—and in the rock tower was a large cave. Through the driving rain the monster's tracks could be seen leading right into the cave. Yet although the limits of the cave were visible—it was large enough to contain the creature, but no more—it stood silent and empty, like a mouth caught in a perpetual yawn of stone.

Perplexed, forgetting his fright, Gren came out into the open to observe better—and at once he saw some of the sixteen tummy-belly men.

They crouched together under the further trees fringing the avenue of sand, pressing against the cliff very near that vacant cave. Characteristically, they had sought shelter under an outcrop of rock that now sent a continuous spout of rainwater down upon them. With the long hairs of their bodies washed out flat, they looked very wet indeed, wet and frightened. When Gren suddenly appeared, they gave a wail of panic, clutching their genitals in apprehension.

"Come out here!" Gren called, still looking round fearfully to try to account for the mysterious disappearance of the sea monster.

With the rain spurting into their faces, the tummy-belly men looked thoroughly demoralized. Gren recalled their idiot cry of fear earlier when they had evidently glimpsed the monster. Now they showed an inclination to run from him, milling round in tight circles like sheep and uttering meaningless sounds. Gladly Gren felt fury for their stupidity fill his veins. Stooping, he picked up a heavy stone.

"Come out here to me, you blubbering belly babies!" he called. "Quickly before the monster finds you!"

"O terror! O master! All things hate poor lovely tummy-belly men!" they cried, blundering into each other.

Infuriated, Gren flung his stone. It hit one of the men on a plump hairy buttock, a good shot that had a bad effect. The stricken one jumped squealing into the avenue of sand, whirled about, and began to run away from Gren towards the cave. Taking up the cry, the others bounded and tumbled after him.

"Come back!" Gren cried, running after them down the centre of the sea monster's tracks.

They paid him no heed. Yelping like curs, they burst into the big cave, their noise echoing sharp-

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ly back from its walls. Gren followed them.

The briney reek of the sea monster was heavy in the air.

"Get out of here as quickly as you can," the morel advised in Gren's mind, sending a twinge through his whole body.

All over the walls and roof of the cave were protruding rods of rock, pointing inwards and ending in eye sockets similar to those on the outside of the cliff. These eye sockets too were watchful; as the tummy-belly men bumped into them, they rolled back lids and began to stare, one by one, more and more.

Finding they were cornered, the men began to sprawl in the sand at Gren's feet and set up a hullaballoo for mercy.

"O mighty big killing lord with strong skin, O king of running and chasing, look how we ran to you when we saw you! How glad we are to honour our poor old tummy-eyes with a sight of you. We ran straight to you, though our poor running was confused and somehow our legs sent us the wrong way instead of happy right ways."

More eyes were opening round the cave now, directing a stony stare at the group. Gren seized one of the tummy-bellies roughly by his hair and pulled him into a standing position; at this the others fell quiet, glad perhaps that they had been momentarily spared.

"Now you listen to me," Gren said, through clenched teeth. He had come to hate these people with a fierce aversion, for they drew out all the latent bullying instincts in him. "I wish none of you harm, as I've told you before. But you have all got to get out of here at once. Danger waits here. Back onto the beach, quick, the lot of you!"

"You will stone us—"

"Never mind what I'll do! Do what I say. Move!" And as he spoke he sent the fellow reeling towards the cave mouth.

Then what Gren thought of afterwards as the Mirage began.

A critical number of eyes in the cave walls had opened.

Time stopped. The world turned green. The tummy-belly man by the cave mouth, perched on one leg in a flying attitude, turned green, petrified in his absurd position. The rain behind him turned green. Everything: green and immobile.

And shrinking. To dwindle. To shrivel and contract. To become a drop of rain falling forever down the lungs of the heavens. Or to be a grain of sand marking an eternal tumble through hourglasses of endless time. To be a proton speeding inexhaustibly through its own pocket-sized version of limitless space. Finally to reach the infinite immensity of being nothing . . . the infinite richness of non-existence . . . and thus of becom-

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ing God . . . and thus of being the top and tail of one's own creation . . .

. . . of summoning up a billion worlds to rattle along the green links of every second . . . of flying through uncreated stacks of green matter that waited in a vast ante-chamber of being for its hour or eon of use . . .

For he *was* flying, wasn't he? And these happier motes alongside (weren't they?) were the beings that he or someone else, someone on another plane of memory, had once called 'tummy-bellies.' And if it was flight, and not something entirely different like dancing or singing, then it was happening in this impossible green universe of delight, in some element other than air and in some flux apart from time. And they were flying in light, emitting light.

And they were not alone.

Everything was with them. Life had replaced time, that was it; death had gone, for the clocks here would tick off fertilities only. But two of the everythings were familiar . . .

In that vague other existence—oh it was so hard to recall, a dream connected with a beach of sand and grey rain (grey? that could be nothing like green, for green had no likenesses), in that existence there had been a great bird diving and a great beast emerging from the sea . . . and they had come through the . . . mirage and were here in this same sappy delight. The element about them was full of the assurance that here there was room for everything to grow and develop without conflict, to develop forever if needed, tummy-belly, bird, or monster.

And he knew that they had been directed to the mirage in a way he had not. Not that it mattered, for here was the sugar of being, of just being in this effortless eternal flight/dance/song, without time or scale or worry.

With only the fulfilment of growing green and good.

—Yet he was somehow falling behind the others! His first impetus was dying. There was worry, even here, and dimension had some meaning even here, or he would not be behind them. They would not be looking back, smiling, beckoning, the bird, the beast, the tummy-bellies. Spores, seeds, happy sappy things, would not be whirling, filling the growing distance between him and his companions. He would not be following, crying, losing it all . . . Oh, losing all this suddenly dear and bright unimaginable place.

He would not be aware again of fear, of a last hopeless attempt to regain paradise, of the green going, of vertigo taking him and eyes, a million eyes all saying "No" and spitting him back where he belonged . . .

He was back in the cave.

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sprawled on the trampled sand in a posture crudely aping flight. He was alone. About him, a million stone eyes closed in disdain. He was doubly alone as the tower of rock removed its presence from the cave.

The rain still rained. He knew that that measureless eternity during which he had been away had lasted only for a flicker of time. Time . . . whatever it was . . . perhaps it was just a subjective phenomenon, a mechanism in a human bloodstream from which vegetables did not suffer.

Gren sat up, startled by his thoughts. 'Subjective phenomenon' indeed! How—

"Morel!" he whispered.

"I'm here . . ."

A long silence fell.

At last without prompting the brain fungus spoke.

"You have a mind, Gren," it twanged. "So the tower would not accept you—us. The tummy-bellies were almost as mindless as the sea creature or the bird; they were accepted. What is now mirage to us is now reality to them. They were accepted."

Another silence.

"Accepted where?" Gren asked. It had been so beautiful . . .

The morel did not answer directly.

"This age is the long age of the vegetable," it said. "It has grown green upon the earth, it has rooted and proliferated without thought. It has taken many forms and exploited many environments, so that every possible ecological nook has long since been filled on earth.

"The earth is more impossibly overcrowded than it has ever been in any earlier age. Plants everywhere . . . all ingeniously, mindlessly, seeding and propagating, doubling the confusion, adding to the pressing problem of how another blade of grass can find a niche in which to grow.

"When your distant predecessor, man, was ruler of this planet, he had a way with the overcrowded bed in his garden. He transplanted. Now, somehow, nature has invented her own gardener. The rocks have shaped themselves into transmitters. Probably there are stations like this all round the coasts . . . stations where any near-mindless thing can be accepted for onward transmission . . . stations where plants can be transplanted . . ."

"Transplanted *where*?", Gren asked. "Where—tell me, Morel—where was that place?"

Something like a sigh floated down the aisles of his mind.

"Can't you see I'm guessing, Gren? Since I have joined forces with you, I have become part human. Who knows the worlds available to different forms of life? The sun means one thing to you and another to a flower. To us the sea is terrible; to that great crea-

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ture we saw . . . There would be neither words nor thoughts to describe where we went; how could there be, when it was so patently the product of . . . non-ratiocinative processes. . . ."

Gren got unsteadily to his feet.

"I want to be sick," he said.

He staggered out of the cave.

"To conceive of other dimensions, other modes of being—" continued the morel.

"For soul's sake, shut up!" Gren cried. "What does it matter to me that there are places—states—I can't . . . can't attain. I can't, and that's that. It was all a beastly mirage, so leave me alone, will you? I want to be sick."

The rain was abating. It pattered lightly on his backbone as he arched it to lean head forward against a tree. His head throbbed, his eyes watered, his stomach heaved.

They would have to make sails from the big leaves and sail away from here, he and Yattmur and the four surviving tummy-belly men. They must get away. As it had become colder, they might have to make coverings for themselves out of those same leaves. This world was no paradise, but in some respects it was manageable to be part of.

He was still throwing up the contents of his stomach when he heard Yattmur calling.

He looked up, grinning feebly. She was coming along the beach. As they ran towards each other, the rain stopped and the sun came burning forth again.

Vintage Wine

My vampire thirst,
learning more subtle tastes
than tang of blood,
sucks up fear's chilly pulsing.
My lips have reddened
with distillate of love
from a more secret source
than any in the breast.
I can forego
the currents of your body,
being more choicely tabled
at your soul.

DORIS PITKIN BUCK

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